

Lock and Key
By BBI Lowlyte

Disclaimer/Author Notes:

This story takes place in Spring 1987 (between the events of the movie and Rafterman's proposed script for the sequel, from which it takes a few plot cues). It's written from Reno Nevada's point of view much after the fact, which seemed the best way to avoid getting flamed by folks who own the book, and lets me pick up a few details from there more easily as well.

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BTW, the title comes from a song of the same name by Rush, from their 1987 album, Hold Your Fire.

To the Reader

It will doubtless be charged by our usual critics that the following material is little more than a sorry attempt to keep our names in the popular press. Were that the case, I fear I would have done better to emulate the trend at present ubiquitous to the film industry and placed photos of the actual devastation throughout; however, those of you in the St. Louis area no doubt recall the news reports of the day quite well enough without my feeble reminders. Likewise, there are those who will criticize Wayback soundly, when the facts of the matter so clearly indicate his lack of foreknowledge was no fault of his own. Indeed, it has only been recently that we learned of some of the occurrences herein, and if I have taken any liberties, it is to recreate certain conversations which no one now alive will testify in regard to. That conversations on the subjects occurred is beyond doubt, but the language representing them herein is my own interpretation of how they must have gone, based on the evidence of events themselves. I have, as usual, attempted to be as faithful as possible to events as they actually happened, and would particularly like to thank certain of our gypsy residents, without whose assistance this document would be a much poorer work.

Reno

Chapter One

No one who'd ever spent a full 24 hours at the Institute in the last few years would have been at all surprised to hear Perfect Tommy playing a Metallica tune; ever since Jet Lightfoot had first turned over her Stratocaster on permanent loan, he'd been expanding on his guitar skills to the point that he could have played lead in any band but the Cavaliers. That Buckaroo would admit to knowing the same song, however, might well have turned some heads. Not that he would have noticed under the circumstances; his full and not inconsiderable attention was entirely for his patient rather than his voice.

Another time and place, a different set of circumstances, and he would have been sitting watch on Replay in the Institute infirmary, using prerecorded music to keep her relatively quiet. It was a trick he'd learned in dealing with our non-human wounded, but one that seemed to work with almost any psychic so long as you didn't offend their ear in the process. In the aftermath of an attempt on all of our lives, he was doing the best anyone could have expected from anyone short of Jesus Christ Himself with what we had to work with. Given our present need for much tightened security, what we had wasn't a lot.

A bit of background may be helpful for our younger readers. Replay is hardly your average intern; although there are those who say no such thing exists, we do consider some talents or degrees of ability beyond normal expectations. As a rule, you don't come across even amateur parapsychologists every day, and when you do, they aren't usually anxious to tell you whether they're in that field for personal reasons or just out of curiosity. With this particular intern, the answer was decidedly both. By education and inclination an ethnomusicologist and anthropologist, she took up studying the occult at a very early age in an attempt to figure out her own peculiar talents, which she was evidently quite forthright with Buckaroo about on the occasion of their first encounter. While she'd been one of us for a considerable length of time at this point, she held Hanoi Xan personally responsible for the fact that she hadn't yet made Residency. To her credit, most of us agree with her reasoning, but I get ahead of myself. I should also note that she's fond of almost all genres of music, but some much more than others, and that this was the first time she'd been in a position to come along on tour with us.

Had things gone as planned, we would still have been staying in a downtown St. Louis hotel, with three shows behind us and a two-day seminar to do at SLU before moving on to Chicago. Instead, we'd been checked in for less than five hours when Replay, either clairvoyant or close enough to seem so for once, had ordered an emergency evacuation. Rawhide had taken her very seriously, to the point of seeing the entire building cleared except for a few of our demolitions-qualified personnel. It was her misfortune to locate the bomb first, and she hadn't been able to clear out in time. As a result of the blast itself, our rooms were in shambles and a fair amount of our equipment a total write-off, both of which proved to be the least of our worries.

To delay further incidents and to keep bystanders out of any potential crossfire, we'd been forced to relocate hastily. As a result, we were now holed up in a former Catholic girls school on the outskirts of the metropolitan area, with little more in its favor than its low profile and the fact that the utilities were still turned on. The concerts we'd originally been scheduled to play had been postponed indefinitely, as much at the request of local

authorities as by our own reluctance to appear publically without Buckaroo, who himself had strayed little more than a few dozen feet from his patient from the time we'd found her among the wreckage with hundreds of tiny needles protruding from her hands, arms, and face. Removing the shrapnel had been a considerably higher priority than figuring out immediately why it took that particular form. Only after we'd set up in the former school had anyone realized that we might be safe from further attack from the outside for awhile.

Sometimes it seems that we know considerably more about Xan than even Interpol does. For years, we'd been aware that he was given to using the nerve poison Talava, which I have described in some detail elsewhere. Not content with merely destroying our rooms and killing people, on this occasion Xan had devised something more dastardly -- a shaped charge meant to direct most of the blast against the building itself, but also to spray any survivors with thousands of projectiles coated in that poison. Thanks to the warning she'd given us, only Replay had been exposed, but that was bad enough.

According to Interpol records, no one has ever actually died of Talava poisoning. That sort of thing just doesn't happen. We have to concur that there are currently no deaths recorded as directly related, but disagree with that official estimation of the possibility. While it is true that in most people, Talava improves physical health but leaves only a kind of zombie, we have cause to believe that a certain Agency of the federal government conducted experiments during Vietnam which involved Talava combined with a number of other drugs. Our own early research into one such possible case, backed up by work at another lab in California, has proven sufficient cause to believe that Talava can be addictive under the proper conditions, and very possibly fatal if stopped cold turkey. Some of that research had proven vital to keeping Replay alive the first time she'd been exposed to the drug, and to clearing most of it from her system. Paranoid that she either was or would become one of Xan's puppets and therefore a danger to us because of it, she'd departed the Institute as soon as she was well enough to travel. We'd had word of extensive consultations with some of Jet's folk in the months since, although little seemed to have come of it apart from repeated assurances, and it had only been in the last six weeks that she'd become convinced we might be safe if she returned.

More concerned that we'd lose her this time than that she was suddenly more dangerous to know than before, Buckaroo had put himself directly in the path of any trouble she was still capable of. Wherefore he was sitting there in the chemistry lab turned makeshift isolation ward, singing for an audience of one as though nothing else mattered. He'd been in there for the last three days, apart from brief moments spent dealing with such logistics issues as even Rawhide couldn't cover for him on; if he'd slept at all, he'd done so close enough to Replay that he would have been one of the first things she noticed if she'd regained consciousness. Always he'd been in earshot; she was far too much like some of our gypsy residents in that regard, and we had more than adequate experience with the reactions of a panicky telekinetic to want her left alone for more than a few seconds at a stretch if she was wounded and out of it. That Buckaroo hadn't let any of us take some of the watch duty for him was more than sufficient indication of how worried he was. Likewise, the way he was careful not to push his voice; Replay was easily as much of an audiophile as any of her "cousins" in California, and as given to critique a poor performance from any resident rather harshly. Instead, he'd called on a few specific interns in to back him in rotation with those of us who are Cavaliers, so that she was never completely alone. So far as he was concerned, she was and had always been more dangerous to all concerned while sick or hurt if there wasn't someone at hand to at least warn her of incoming trouble, if only by getting in its way.

As a result, Perfect Tommy had a front row seat when she finally began to regain consciousness, and he was wise enough not to call attention to himself immediately for once. This was a slow and painful process, something she rarely had to deal with. Generally the times she'd had to fight sedatives in order to wake up, it was either slow or painful, not both; on this occasion, she was dealing with her own exhaustion rather than soporifics, which she didn't properly appreciate until much later. Buckaroo finished the last verse much aware that she was close to rejoining the world of the living, willing to give her all the time she needed so long as she either opened her eyes or fell asleep.

Ultimately, she chose the former. "How do you feel?" he asked, speaking in the quiet tones of a man who expects to be dealing with someone else's hangover. As soon as he said it, he began to worry again. Something wasn't right.

Only when she'd blinked a few times and focused properly did he begin to realize what it was. "Like I've been washed over a sharp reef a dozen times or so," she answered, but it was an answer without any real expectation he'd take her at more than face value. "How long was I out?" she asked in return, looking into his eyes for any reaction at all.

That was the last place Buckaroo would have expected her gaze to fall; it wasn't that Replay didn't look people in the eye, just that she didn't do it that directly or for that long. He had the distinct impression that she'd deliberately opted to tell him the truth where she might have lied.

"Almost seventy hours," he said, choosing bluntness himself. "We're not sure if you tried to disarm or contain things."

She didn't know what he was talking about. Didn't remember it, if the look in her own eyes was any indicator. "Don't ask," she said, but it was a bluff, and he wouldn't have been surprised if she realized he knew that.

"Any other wounded?" That came out a bit more tentative sounding than he would have expected if he hadn't been suspicious already.

"Just you," he assured her. "New Jersey and I pulled a couple hundred flechettes out of your hands and forearms before we lost count." The name meant nothing to her, which only confirmed his fears, but she wasn't obvious about letting on. He could probably count on at least some of her training being intact. She was sounding him out, looking for clues as much as he was if not more, following his lead to a degree. "You only chased one intern out, if you're wondering." She couldn't be, but it ought to let her know he was on her side.

She actually took a moment to look around and sample the air before she replied, and to her credit, she was truly a bit embarrassed when she caught the faint aroma of wet ashes where the sprinkler system had put out a trash fire she'd inadvertently started. "Sorry," she said, meaning it; "I didn't damage anything serious, did I?"

That was too much for Tommy, whose fingers trainwrecked on the Stratocaster's strings as he laughed. "Only his ego, Lady. The way he came out of here, you'd have thought his hair was on fire." Farther away than Buckaroo, he hadn't been at the right angle to have caught all the hints that things were still amiss.

She took the surprise much better than Buckaroo would have expected, for it was immediately apparent to him that she really hadn't noticed the blond in spite of the evidence of her ears. Her "Oops," was as unrepentant as he remembered her ever being, and as little thought out, but the sudden wariness in her eyes was quite another matter.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Buckaroo said, hoping to reassure her as much as in truth. Around the Institute, there are few egos of sufficient size that sudden deflation is much of a hazard, Perfect Tommy quite possibly excepted. "Wayback's been startled before."

"He wasn't expecting me to set things on fire?" Even Tommy could hear how tentative she sounded this time.

"He'd just told us you were headblind when you started in with the harmonics," said Buckaroo. She might not want to know, but she had to hear it eventually; if she was half as together mentally as she seemed, she'd be able to deal with hearing it now. "Then the monitor screen blew. The trash was just collateral damage."

"I'd expect all the local talent'd know better than I do where my head is," she admitted. "I guess we don't belong in the same room, huh?" Oddly enough, she seemed more relaxed. Later she'd admit that being told her psychic abilities were gone was comforting, as it was the nearest thing to proof she was among friends she could have asked for safely with another, unknown and evidently disturbing, psionic on the premises.

"I've got five hundred on you," said Tommy. "You fight dirty."

"So I've been told," she said, "but my reflexes are in the basement just now, and I'd rather sleep. Hell of a note, huh? Seventy hours unconscious, and I'm tired; go fig."

"We expected that," Buckaroo told her. "Tommy, you'd better go tell the guys she's awake, but there probably won't be time for any visiting. Have Reno get back in touch with SLU and Contemporary and see what they come up with; have him take Wayback along to watch his back. Then see who you can line up to do overwatch here."

"You got it, Buckaroo. And I tell Wayback he's keeping one open for Xan, right?"

"Make sure they're in armor while you're at it."

"Right." Perfect Tommy got up and gave Buckaroo the Stratocaster. "You, I'll see later," he told Replay, ruffling her dark hair fondly before she could think to worry about whether it was an attack. "Be good."

"Too tired not to be," she admitted. There didn't really seem to be any reason to avoid the truth, after all. If they knew she shouldn't be headblind, these two rated at least a level 5 clearance, and her instincts said they were at least as much on the side of the angels as she was. That meant they were either allies or friends of the family at worst. Certainly they were no real threat, though she wouldn't put any of them past doing cosmetic-grade damage. And at the moment, she'd be much happier with the other psionic well out of range long enough for her to have a good idea how much of a threat Wayback might be. Right now, she was operating on a lot less information than she was comfortable with,

and a frame of reference for most of it that could barely be said to exist. She wasn't about to be bad immediately, even if she'd really felt up to it.

Something about the blond's hand bothered her, though, and she reached for it intending to have a better look. Instead, she found herself pressing the back of his fingers lightly to her own lips as though complimenting him greatly. At that range, she felt more than she should have if Wayback was right about her psionics; the man had played his fingers bloody and was writing it off as cramping from a too-long session if she was any judge of character at all. Her own hand ached in sympathy for a moment, then her vision went psychedelic for a moment and when the colors settled back to normal, that phantom of his injuries was gone as well.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all week, " Tommy said, acknowledging the contact. He was probably at least as surprised by it as she was, but his ego wouldn't allow him to admit it.

"Don't get used to it," Buckaroo advised. "I haven't certified everything yet." Even with that caveat, Tommy departed with one of the biggest grins on his face that any of us had seen for some while.

"We need to talk," Buckaroo said, laying the Strat aside. Tommy was well out of earshot by now, which seemed important. "It's not uncommon to lose several hours immediately surrounding a traumatic injury, but I think you're missing more than that."

"Bring me up to speed first," Replay prompted. "I haven't got a lot to go on here."

"I was afraid of that. I didn't want to let Perfect Tommy in on it; Wayback's a pretty good telepath. You'd rather this stay lower profile than that, at least for now. As long as he thinks you're headblind, he'll try hard not to read you until we can tell if it's permanent, and he can't read me very well except at close range when he's the subject."

"Good. I got enough problems."

"Does 'Talava' mean anything to you?"

"I haaaaate detox," escaped before she'd intended to say anything. When she'd had another second or two to consider her words, though, she had more. "Yeah. I remember some kid name of Indigo; he'd been exposed incountry. Nasty stuff, almost got himself killed repeatedly right after the company stopped the experiment. Near as we can tell, that wasn't completely something he was trying to avoid at the time."

Buckaroo nodded. "You were dosed with the pure stuff several months back," he told her. "Last time you were here, more or less." He proceeded to explain the poison's usual effects and why she wasn't subject to them, and how Indigo had prevented the situation being fatal by taking things a couple steps further than mere detox. Told her as well how and why she'd fled, and the little we knew that had come of it. "Wayback's only been with us for about four months, and he's not too fond of who he thinks Indigo's boss is." Maybe our intern telepath wasn't inclined to try to eavesdrop on this conversation, but the oblique reference seemed safest, and he hoped it would tell her something he didn't dare say outright without panicking her. "As near as I can tell, he can't understand why she'd go to the effort of making Residency just to go back to her own people.

"Unless we've missed something, Xan didn't even know you were back when he set up this attack. I think he was trying to drop the roof on as many people as he could, and hit the rest of us with Talava. If he caused as much chaos as he possibly could, it would probably make it a lot easier to slip at least one agent in without us noticing. You told Rawhide something about being on the verge of half crazy that something was wrong and we needed to get out; he said evacuate. That was about it."

She considered all of that for a long moment. "Rawhide? Big guy, cowboy, quiet type. Grin that could blot out the moon when he bothers to use it. Pianist, maybe." Buckaroo nodded; given her present mind, that was much more than he'd expected to get from her. "Can't remember why, but there's a pencil sketch with that handle written on it on one of my walls around the ranch."

This was definitely getting stranger. He'd seen that sketch once, years ago, within hours of her drawing it. Rawhide had still officially been dead in those days. She'd seen him for the first time in the middle of the night, without lights in a place he shouldn't have been without her noticing earlier than that; the sketch was her first impression of him from that brief glimpse and better than a number of our photographs. It was common knowledge among the Residents exactly where that sketch was currently hanging, and how it had come to have anyone's name written on it. It was also common knowledge that it was the only sketch she'd done of any of us which she'd ever ended up keeping.

"He insisted you keep it," Buckaroo reminded her. "Said something at the time about some days remembering who he was that didn't make a lot of sense to me. You seemed to get it, though."

"It's a quote from Miami Vice. Gina asks Sonny if he ever forgets who he is when he's undercover so long at a stretch, and he answers her, 'Darlin', sometimes I remember.' -- too apt by half around some of us."

"But not right now."

"That's about the size of it. I have holes in my memory, not a wholesale gap. I could tell you anything you want to know about the ranch, and I've got a good clue you're at least a level 6 clearance, but I can't say much for certain about you."

"Try."

"The blond called you Buckaroo. You play guitar, too; people who don't just don't handle one the way you were holding that Strat. If you're being as straight with me as I think, you're at least a medic, and I'd guess maybe a surgeon from those fingers. You've been involved with intel to at least some degree for awhile now, enough to have at least one price on your head and a healthy respect for body armor. You've dealt with me personally being wounded before, or Tommy wouldn't've been in here playing; he's done it before or both of you would've noticed he was bleeding."

"How'd you do that?" So he hadn't been imagining things.

"Haven't got a clue, unless I only toggled something that was already in place. If it was **me** that did it."

Chapter Two

"Whadya mean, no time for visiting?" I asked Perfect Tommy. He'd come looking for me first as a matter of priorities. With Replay's condition as fragile as it still was, getting things in motion as quickly as possible seemed to be a good idea; the more we could accomplish without disturbing her in the process, the better. Even so, I would have liked the opportunity to see for myself that she was conscious again.

"She still seemed pretty out of it," he said. "Complained she was tired. Plus I think Buckaroo's got plans to be moving. He wanted you and Wayback to see what you could arrange about the postpones."

"More like he wants Wayback to see if they're on the level."

"Maybe. I think maybe the boss just wants you to have early warning. Wear armor, he said."

We both knew that Buckaroo had more reason than that to want Wayback out of range for awhile, but were trying not to think about it. He wouldn't have appreciated knowing his presence was a cause of consternation, and the truth was I needed to update the local promoters and university officials. Under the circumstances, it would not have been unreasonable for me to have specifically requested the intern as my escort; his reflexes were almost on a par with Tommy's even on those few occasions when he couldn't anticipate his enemy more accurately than most. Too, he had something of an advantage at spotting deceptions or fractured communications, which we had no ethical problem with him using so long as he was only gauging emotions.

With things as unsettled as they were among us at present, expecting him to avoid reading us went beyond unreasonable. To some degree, we were all projecting at him like it or not, and the fact that most of it was either our collective anger at Xan or worries for and about Replay wasn't likely to be helping his own peace of mind any. With a bit of luck, he'd take that as a third reason he needed to be out for awhile.

"Any reason?"

"Nothing particular. You want one of the local kids to drive?"

"It's only St. Louis, Tommy. We can actually run the GPS for once." This was no insult to the global positioning system the US military was only beginning to seriously test in conflicts, but rather something of a comment on the local architecture. At the time, the level of accuracy of the few, vastly overpriced civilian-grade GPS receivers on the market was such that clustered buildings over a certain height were a significant problem. Aside from a few square blocks near the Gateway Arch, St. Louis has never been GPS-unfriendly in the way so many other large cities have. "Besides, I've always wondered how Wayback'd handle city traffic."

"You got a point there." From his sudden smile, I suspected he was thinking how different the local conditions were from those we were used to -- or those the Canadian intern had grown up around. Under other circumstances, it would have been more fun finding out. "Keep your eyes open, huh? Can't send a strike team to bail you out if he gets lost."

"I'll tell him you said that."

Perfect Tommy chuckled over that as he walked off. Wayback might or might not retaliate with a practical joke, but that was as out of hand as things were likely to get, so the blond wasn't especially worried about it. Instead, he was still trying to carry out his instructions, debating who might be available to sit watch over Replay at least long enough for Buckaroo to get some real sleep.

Lindbergh was the first candidate he found. Several younger interns were clustered around our chief pilot, who was conducting an informal demonstration of a basic principle of flight using a phone book, someone's left shoe, and a can of soda. Being Perfect, Tommy reached over and plucked the soda out of the air. Lindbergh looked at him curiously, but kept the other two objects in flight as effortlessly as if they'd rehearsed the move.

"I got good news and bad news," Tommy said. "Replay's awake, but no visitors yet. Boss wants someone to sit with her for awhile."

"I guess I'm it," Lindbergh answered that. He caught the phone book; the shoe he merely deflected back to its apparent owner.

"At least you know to let sleeping mechanics lie," said Tommy. "She's not tracking at anything close to speed yet."

"And I have a history of not bothering her, huh? Figures. How's Buckaroo holding up?"

"Good, considering. He needs to grab some real sleep."

"Then I guess class is dismissed. Remind me later where we left off," the pilot told his audience. To Perfect Tommy he said, "Give me about five to scrounge up something to deal with that and I'll head down there."

Lindbergh was as good as his word. He knocked on the chem lab door almost exactly five minutes later, and paused only for a moment before he let himself in. "Perfect Tommy said you wanted overwatch," he said. He was carrying an oversized book in one hand and had a 9mm Beretta holstered in custom leather under his left armpit, no attempt made to conceal it.

"You volunteered," Replay guessed before Buckaroo could acknowledge him. The firearm didn't bother her in the slightest; it was something she merely cataloged. The book held her eye only slightly longer.

"Nope," he answered her cheerily; "I was drafted." From the tone, it was clear that if Tommy had asked for volunteers within earshot of the pilot, he would have jumped at the chance anyhow. "He said he could trust me not to make moves."

"You wouldn't ... and another intern might?" said Buckaroo, going along with it.

"That was my reaction. He said I had better sense than to try again without a chute." With Lindbergh, that could have been anything from a fragment of history to an attempt to make Replay more comfortable with his presence, or just his rather warped sense of humor manifesting.

"Mmm. Sounds like a plan to me," Replay said.

"That makes two of us," Buckaroo confessed. "You had us pretty worried."

She nodded. "Go on. I'm not running off under my own steam for awhile." Not unless events gave her no choice, at least, although at the time she didn't bother to admit it even to herself.

Buckaroo got up from his seat slowly, stretching as though he hadn't moved for several hours. "Call me if anything happens, " he told Lindbergh, then leaned over to lay his hand on Replay's shoulder for a moment before departing. The way she relaxed under that touch told him she knew exactly what he'd meant by it, headblind or not.

The pilot followed to the door and secured it, for all the good that might do. The frosted glass top panel wouldn't last two seconds in the face of an attack, and was only useful in that he might see a silhouette by way of early warning. Like Buckaroo, he was doing the best he knew with inadequate resources, though he perhaps had more of a clue how to do that than many other interns would have. "Anything I can do to make you more comfortable, sing out," he told his charge, turning his attention back to her. He needn't have bothered; she was already asleep.

Lindbergh wasn't certain whether to take that as a sign that her exhaustion was more profound than even she had wanted to admit, or a sign she trusted him at least that far. From what he'd heard of her, either one was possible; he simply hadn't known her long enough to judge which was likeliest. If she hadn't had any background in intelligence before her visit to Jet's people, they would have made sure she had basic working fieldcraft down cold before letting her leave, especially as Hanoi Xan might well eventually send one of his lieutenants to track her down. Unfortunately, that bit of forethought might work against Institute personnel this once, making her more paranoid than she would normally have been about her surroundings and perhaps far too unlikely to show any real sign of it. He didn't want to add to her fears by going overboard trying to reassure her. She had enough to deal with, especially if Buckaroo had told her what had happened. Drawing Xan's attention, even inadvertently, was definitely on the top ten list of things for an intern to avoid if possible; accomplishing it twice in the space of a year would have justified anyone's concern.

Not for the first time, our chief pilot wished he had even half the talent either of our gypsy residents possessed. Barring that, he would have settled for an idea of how to stretch his own mental shields to cover Replay as well as -- or even instead of -- himself. Before this was over, she was likely to need such an assist, and he didn't think Wayback would be inclined to attempt it.

Out in the hall, Buckaroo heard the door being locked behind him and felt a little better for it; he perhaps more than the rest of us knew how justified Replay's reputation was. If he'd noticed such precautions, she would have had to be completely deaf, or dead, not to have been aware as well. Too, he was glad Perfect Tommy had sent Lindbergh, drafted or not. The pilot was nowhere close to being in Wayback's league, but wasn't altogether without talents of his own which might prove useful. Sick or wounded, Replay had always tolerated pilots and musicians better than any other sort of stranger; he was just the latest to prove that it didn't seem to matter whether she was conscious or not to recognize either profession -- both of which her kin associated with psi talent often enough for her not to mistake him for a threat simply because he hadn't been born as headblind as most.

But with Lindbergh the only other pilot/musician among us, Buckaroo was aware the rest of us were not as immune to potential risk from Replay once she recovered further. And while she slept, she was probably in greater danger of

Wayback inadvertently reading her mind than he would have liked. With this to be concerned about, he went in search of Perfect Tommy. Pecos stopped him in the hall outside a former teachers' lounge before he'd gotten far in his quest. "They've been gone about five minutes," she said. "You might relax a little. Tommy told some of us what was up a couple ago."

"Not as much as you think," Buckaroo said. "I need to brief everybody who's been in on this from day one. We may have a situation."

"I'll get people together. Any of it for local consumption, or just residents plus . . . ?"

"Right now, residents plus. The public part can wait; this is NTK."

'Need to know' was a phrase far more often invoked by the intelligentsia than among us, but it was no great surprise to Pecos that he'd picked up the acronym -- probably from Indigo, who lived with it on a daily basis.

"That include Reno?"

"I need you to take care of that for me later."

She nodded. "Where do you want this? Anyplace special?"

"This should do," he answered, pointing at the lounge door.

"Give me fifteen; I think I can get people by then. Half of them are down in the gym as it is."

"Make it an hour. I need to put some things together." He was rather glad when Pecos only nodded and headed off to find people rather than asking what he meant; he wasn't certain he knew that himself.

He was in the kitchen grabbing a snack and trying to get his head completely straight when Rawhide came back from a routine perimeter walk-around. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Tommy said she was awake, but ..."

"Go have a look for yourself," Buckaroo said. "See if we agree."

"That bad."

"She wouldn't admit to it right now, but situation comes to mind."

Rawhide nodded. "I guessed as much when I saw Reno and Wayback. She headblind or just paranoid around him?"

"He says headblind, but I wouldn't place bets. If she's paranoid, it's definitely too low-key for me to tell."

"That could change. I don't like the breeze out there. Big Norse says there's nothing from NOAA, but --"

"Better tell Lindbergh, then. He's sitting." They both knew that the National Weather Service was hardly infallible, and that NOAA Weather Radio wouldn't put anything into their forecast until the Weather Service issued the next updates, but the pilot was woefully unaware of how Replay disliked major storms, or that

she had good reason for that opinion. "Keep the rest to yourself if you can; I'd rather it not get out any sooner than necessary."

If there has ever been an intern among us who'd caught Hanoi Xan's imagination so thoroughly as Replay, we remain blissfully unaware of the fact. Through his extensive network of spies, he'd learned of her return from the wilds of Brazil almost as soon as her plane had touched down at La Guardia, although he hadn't made much of the report at once. It had only been a day or two later that he'd realized she was the woman who'd been Lo Pep's prisoner for a pathetically brief length of time months earlier. Her companion at the time had been an ex-Black Beret, so the escape itself would not have been particularly memorable but for her part in it.

Annoying though her habit of surviving was, she would be well worth having as part of his network of spies and assassins. The escape alone had been proof enough of that. The Black Beret, whatever his name was, had undoubtedly worked with her before or was far better than reputation hinted; once she'd made the opportunity, the two of them had functioned masterfully without recourse to any form of communication that recorders might capture. All of this was even more worth noting because she, at least, had been suffering the first symptoms of the talava reaction that had come close to killing her.

Since then, he'd bided his time waiting for another opportunity to get his hands on her, and his network had come through. Once he'd known the location of the hotel in St. Louis, getting the bomb there had been no great feat. Like the Mafia before it, the World Crime League had tentacles in every level of the Gateway City's society, and bribes hadn't even been necessary.

Just now, Xan wasn't sure whether he was pleased with the latest reports or not. The meddlesome intern had survived again, this time throwing off the overt effects of exposure in a matter of hours rather than weeks despite his calculations that she'd taken a dose that should have been enough to make any human being a crazed, ravening zombie even he couldn't control. This had to be verified, even if it meant giving up one of the few spies he had inside Team Banzai. He flipped through views on a large screen against one wall until he was looking at an image of several of the Cavaliers.

"... no visitors yet." Perfect Tommy's voice said from the speakers. "I'd guess tomorrow, maybe."

"But he hasn't come out yet?" Penny Priddy asked from somewhere off screen.

"Give it a few," said Tommy. "I just sent Lindbergh down to take over. You might be able to get Buckaroo to go pass out for awhile; he probably needs it as much as Replay could do with some rest."

So, the gods had seen fit to grant his desire without the necessity of risking a spy yet. And perhaps Banzai was growing lax as well, to leave only one guard on her; it might be that he could slip one of his eyes in for a look on the pretext of questioning this Lindbergh about something unrelated. It was worth some thought. As for right now -- "Find an opportunity. Ask Banzai all the questions one of her friends would ask about her. Report to me with all you learn." The view on the screen dipped very slightly, as though the person wearing a concealed camera had tried to nod without anyone noticing.

Driving in St. Louis is unlike driving anywhere else in the US, although some aspects of it are seen elsewhere. The rolling "stop" practiced there is rather more of a severe slowdown than a full halt and is known in some parts of the country as a "St. Louis stop". Being in the appropriate lane at any given point in a trip is important enough that the more thoughtful locals include such information in directions for their out-of-town friends, although in general the signage is above average, and certainly posted at a more reasonable range than in Kansas City. Blind corners and oddly angled intersections are common, and the number of one way streets would confound even the soberest Corellian. Speed limit signs are at best mere guidelines, and not always presumed as a recommended minimum; there is a stretch of I-70, for instance, where the posted limit averages being 5-10 mph *above* the speed most traffic travels, this for no apparent reason. The local constabulary travel one to a car, which tends to provoke sudden reversion to speed limits, but small roadside police conventions of 3 or more cars are frequent enough not to draw special attention.

Perhaps the largest single hazard of driving in the Gateway City, however, is precipitation. Blue Blazes living in the area often refer to something they call the "idiot factor", which comes in two types: your usual garden variety idiot, who suffers from EEDB (engage engine, disengage brain); and the Instant Idiot (Just Add Water--In Any Form). The first variety is common anywhere that automobiles may be found in motion, but the appearance of the latter sort on the scale seen in St. Louis seems to be something of a local phenomenon. Traffic may be moving at 60 mph through a construction zone, but if three good-sized raindrops hit someone's windshield, chances are high that he'll stand on the brakes and drop his speed by at least 15 mph in a matter of seconds regardless of the speed limit, traffic conditions, or any other concerns. At the other extreme, there are people who drive like they're on dry pavement even in the middle of ice storms.

Late August in Missouri is often plagued by intense heat, which sometimes leads to severe weather. Fortunately for life and limb, most of the state is covered by some combination of local radio stations, warning sirens, and/or NOAA weather radio. Unfortunately, the stronger storms, especially those with a good deal of lightning, can be as much of a civilian-grade GPS hazard as tall buildings. We discovered this disheartening fact of life along I-70 in St. Peters, when lightning hit the radio tower of a weight station just as we passed it. Even with the rubber of our tires as insulation, it was possible to feel the charge in the air to an uncomfortable degree, but when it's suddenly raining so hard you can't see properly to stay in your own lane, it's difficult to take cover.

GPS-less and shaken, we exited at the first opportunity a bit over a mile (and a full fifteen minutes) later. The local sirens were still silent, and we sat in the car in a restaurant parking lot almost that much longer before the rain subsided enough for a run for the building to be worthwhile. We had the entryway to ourselves for only a few seconds before we were joined by other drenched souls pushing their way inside, far more interested in hot beverages and how long a wait there was than in any particular person there. The waitress who seated us didn't give either of us a second glance even when I pulled out my go-phone to try checking in again.

This time, I got an answer. "It hit here hard about twenty minutes ago. No hail, and the winds aren't that bad, but there's a lot of lightning. You'd better stay put for awhile," Big Norse advised, enunciating a bit more carefully than usual to be heard over the background of storm and voices. "The National Weather

Service just issued the warning about ten minutes after you caught it. They must have been as off guard as you were, because we're not finding any record of a watch."

"What's expiration time?" I asked her, glancing at Wayback over my coffee mug. I didn't bother to ask him why he hadn't seen it coming; foreseeing weather wasn't his strong suit, especially when it was weather he would have to deal with personally.

"You've got another hour before they think it'll clear Missouri altogether. And Reno, you should hear the cops downtown. They still haven't finished recovering evidence from the hotel, and this looks like it's coming right at them. If you could aim a storm, I'd be worried; this one hasn't followed anything like the normal track since it started."

"I wouldn't put it past the Nova Police," I said, "but at least we know it's not personal." Under the circumstances, I was loath to use even one of Xan's lesser-known epithets. "I'll check back before we leave here, or turn on the beacon sooner if things look interesting."

"Switch it on when you leave, regardless. We can track and vector you in that way unless you take another near hit. I think the EMP from that strike probably fried the GPS receiver." She didn't have to explain further why I hadn't gotten through earlier. The electromagnetic pulse from one lightning bolt is a lot smaller than the EMP signature of a nuclear weapon, but still enough to make communications interesting when there's a really active storm. By using a satellite based system, we usually avoided disruptions due to mere static, but there were the occasional exceptions. If I'd been on the go-phone when the weight station tower was hit, it probably would have been defunct as well.

"Probably have to eat it too," I said. "I doubt it even makes the deductible."

The waitress returned with the coffeepot in one hand and a pen in the other, ready to take an order if we were so inclined. "I'll talk to you in a bit," I told Big Norse, and put the go-phone away. Food might not dry us out any, but it would definitely make me less annoyed about being wet.

Chapter Three

Replay was not generally given to nightmares, but under the circumstances most of us would have expected it. Hence Lindbergh wasn't at all surprised when she sat bolt upright at the sharp crack of thunder which indicated a lightning strike less than a half-mile away. There was nothing about her to hint that she was other than fully alert, expecting trouble, and prepared to deal with it, but the rumble of more distant thunder a few moments later was enough to let her relax considerably and drop most of that facade. "It's okay," the pilot told her, wondering as he did who he was trying to reassure; "it's only a storm."

"What's the highest point around, and how far?" she asked, which startled him a bit.

"Methodist steeple," he answered after a moment's thought. "Almost half a mile. Or maybe the police dispatch tower a little closer. Hard to tell. Why?"

"A girl has to watch out for lightning if she wants to stay out of hospitals," she said. "It's not one of my favorite weather phenomena." From the tone of her

voice, she might not have relaxed as much as he'd thought. "There isn't a basement around here is there?"

"I can check, but the sirens aren't going off."

"They don't need to for me to be unhappy."

Lindbergh had just reached for his own go-phone when someone knocked on the door, and he pulled the Beretta instead. "It's Rawhide. C'mon, open up; the Lady's got a thing about storms."

The pilot unlocked the door on the strength of recognizing that voice alone, but eased it back cautiously, pistol ready until he was certain. Rawhide nodded his approval and Lindbergh put the gun away. "You're missing whatever Buckaroo wanted to talk about, aren't you?" he asked.

"Not for awhile," said Rawhide, although he'd heard little more of it than most of us at that point. "You up to this, or do I need to carry you?" he asked Replay.

"I think I can manage," she said, "but I'll regret it later."

"It's not far," he said. "We're going to put you in the boiler room for awhile." He helped her to her feet, careful to put himself between her and the small, high windows as much as possible. "Lots of concrete. A little chill maybe, but you'll like it."

"Where do I sign the lease?" she quipped, trying a first step she probably wouldn't have managed if she'd had shoes on.

"Let me help," Rawhide said, slipping an arm around her. She was much too shaky for his liking, but he knew how far he wouldn't get by arguing. If she really needed to be carried, he'd probably find out when she fell over unconscious; pushing the issue would only ensure that at least one of them would end up that way, and it didn't necessarily follow that it would be her.

"Point me the right way," she said. If her decision to trust Buckaroo had been based initially on the fact that he was clearly an ally, she would not have said the same of Rawhide. Remembering his face from her own art was one thing; the way he held her now was quite another. He'd done this before, though she couldn't recall where or when; his grip was deliberately planned to be more of an aid to balance than anything else and to allow her free access to the weapons they both knew she wasn't carrying just now. Nothing about it was calculated enough to strike her as intended to reassure her; he simply knew her better than she might have hoped for under the circumstances, well enough to know she understood the difference between business and opportunity. Just now, it was definitely business.

If Lindbergh had qualms or questions about Rawhide's grip, he wisely kept them to himself. Rumor had it that she was one of the big man's personal recruits, though not one whom Big Norse was jealous of; it was possible considering the apparent difference in their ages that she was a younger sibling, not that it was anyone's business but their own. As long as she wasn't objecting, the pilot didn't really have much to say about it. "Am I still on duty?" he wondered, sticking to a safer subject and holding the door.

"You okay with that?" Rawhide asked Replay. The slightly surprised look she gave him before answering confirmed Buckaroo's hints that something wasn't what it appeared. She didn't seem to understand why he was asking.

"I get a selection?" She certainly knew that someone was going to be keeping an eye out regardless of her wishes, and wasn't bothered by that part of it. Having an unexpected choice, even in theory, was another matter. "Since when?"

"Since overwatch got to be stormwatch," the cowboy said, wondering if she'd take the hint that the other man might not be experienced enough -- or sufficiently briefed -- to deal with her under those circumstances. "And since Raven isn't here."

The name went right past her without any sign of recognition, nothing more than a name she would undoubtedly recall and be able to connect to him later without putting a face to it. She flinched at another nearby lightning strike and nearly lost her footing. "How far?" she asked, the issue of who'd watch over her banished from her immediate attention.

"One more door, and a flight of steps," he told her. "I'll watch her myself, Lindbergh. Go tell the boss I'm working on it, but he may be right."

The stairs proved to be something of a problem for Replay until she decided to close her eyes and lean on Rawhide for navigational assistance as much as for support, but she managed to get down the single flight without toppling over. The boiler room itself was every thing he'd described it to be. Thick concrete walls the builders had intended to help contain the damage had the boiler ever burst were as much insulation for her as she could have expected to find outside the ranch, for which she was immediately grateful. "Better?" Rawhide asked her, hoping it was enough.

"Much," she said. She was only flinching slightly every time the lightning hit, but now some of what looked like mere shivers actually were. "Thanks."

"I think maybe you'd better at least sit down," he suggested. "How about over here?" The interior corner of the room, with not one but two solid walls to her back, struck him as the choice she would have made for herself if she'd been thinking that clearly, so he wasn't surprised when she didn't object to it.

"You're family too, aren't you?" she said, surprising him. "You and Buckaroo both."

"Yeah, and no." Better to be honest, even if he confused her at first. "Nothing the courts recognize around here."

She didn't seem surprised by that. "Did he tell you I've got entire days missing?"

"Just that things weren't right. Hate to say it, but you're missing more than a few days."

"No kidding." She was way too tense, and probably too cold, to go back to sleep any time soon, but at least he could keep her attention off of the lightning enough for her to think straight without undue effort. That was a small victory in its own right, considering that the storm was pretty intense for something that didn't seem inclined to spawn tornadoes in all quarters. "It's like someone's erased specific things, but I can't put enough together to know why

anybody'd try it. Or how they'd go about accomplishing it. That's like trying to pick all the grains of quartz out of a bag of mixed sand; what gain is there in it?"

"You're not just headblind, are you?" He wasn't avoiding her question, just trying to decide how to answer it without feeling like an idiot or worrying her.

"That and confused. Not paranoid of you, if you're wondering." He wasn't surprised that she pulled the blanket he'd brought down with them closer around herself anyhow; the storm had dropped the outside temperature significantly, and she just wasn't acclimated to it. For her, the room would have been a bit chill even if she'd been wearing jeans instead of the overlong T-shirt she'd been put to bed in.

"Me personally, or...?"

"I drew you once," she said. "And I'm guessing you autographed it yourself, but damned if I can tell you if I've ever heard you play. I wasn't even sure Buckaroo was anything more than a friend of the family until he said 'bye'." She didn't explain that, figuring that if she was right about Rawhide, he'd already know what she meant. Other people, Lindbergh in particular, might have taken B. Banzai's parting gesture as nothing more than a casual pat on the shoulder. Anybody who knew her well enough to rate any clearance number at all knew better; in her family, that particular contact was a greeting reserved for parents or siblings. "But so far, the only person I have a hint I ought to be paranoid about is this Wayback."

Rawhide whistled. "Buckaroo wasn't kidding when he said situation. Said you wouldn't call it that, though." As far as she was concerned, *situation* was a very loaded word, not used without caution; most of us were beginning to pick up that habit.

"I haven't got the information to base a call on," she admitted, "so I'm stuck leaving it to the local experts for now." She shuddered again, and this time even he could feel the electricity in the air for a fraction of a second before the strike. "Should I be paranoid of you, or *for* you?"

"Of, no. For -- maybe. Can't say yet whether there was more to it than the talava."

"Lords, this is frustrating," she told him. "I've seen enough by now to know I ought to know people, but I just can't retrieve anything."

"Kick in the jaw, ain't it?" Rawhide sympathized.

"You?"

"Awhile back," he said. This, at least, was not something they'd ever discussed before. "I was clinically dead for a couple minutes. The medics got me back, but I woke up not knowing where I was or who anybody was. Took a couple days to get used to the medication before I started getting anything back."

"That was meds." She said it like she'd seen the same thing happen elsewhere -- not dismissive of it, merely negating it as a likely culprit in her case. "You've got no personal way of telling how disoriented in general you were, do you? This doesn't happen to me, not that way, and not from having my head bashed in."

"Repeatedly." He brushed her hair back from the part of her forehead where her skull was protected by a steel plate under the skin.

If she hadn't been pretty certain of his status before, that would have clinched it. "The last time I had to deal with anything remotely like this was, Lords, maybe ten years ago, right before I nearly took out the end of the landing bay. Hadn't been back in the world for more than a few months when I about lost it over a little brother being threatened and --" Whatever she'd been intending to say, she lost it in the face of a wave of memories too recently regained and almost too painful to have shared even with those involved. It took the overpressure from a lightning bolt hitting the top of the chapel steeple only a few hundred feet away to bring her back to the present.

"You don't have to talk about it," Rawhide said. Whatever was bothering her, it had to be pretty serious; she didn't normally say 'back in the world' except in contrast to 'incountry'. Neither was an expression Wayback -- or many of the other interns just then -- would have expected to hear anyone of her apparent age use, dating as they did to the Vietnam War. Those of us who are residents knew her to be much older than she looked, but also to be very closemouthed about the months she'd spent in the middle of that conflict.

"I think maybe I do," she disagreed. "But not here or now." Her control was questionable at best, if the tone of her voice was any indication. "I thought I'd gotten back everything I lost then that I was ever going to recover, but something sneaked up on me a few months ago, Christmas shopping. I'm not dealing with that too well yet."

"I've seen a couple of Indigo's flashbacks, lady. I don't begin to know how you could take it."

"I almost didn't. Sometimes I still wonder if I did."

We live in an age when most people are quite media-literate by the time they reach adulthood, if not sooner. But with the broadcast ratings services using a statistical sampling scheme, most of us end up quite completely out of the loop in terms of the actual numbers game. The Nielsen company, at recent report, polls less than two thousand households in order to generate the number, in millions, of people watching a particular television show on any night of the week. The higher the ratings a show gets, the more its network can charge for advertising in that time slot.

Ratings are important for radio too, although quite how they're determined is even more arcane to most of us. Certainly, a station's format affects the numbers, but there are perhaps more subtle factors related to the DJ than are fully realized. A DJ having a bad day and venting it on the air may work in one market but not another, while a DJ having a bad day on the air is likely to make the numbers drop regardless of the target audience. Concert announcements are always good for ratings, though. Generally speaking, background information about a band the station is welcoming to town can do wonders as well, especially if it's presented a bit at a time. Nonetheless, there are limits.

One of the DJ's on a particular station in town had stepped over the line. Those of you native to the area probably aren't having to guess which station was involved, even if you didn't hear it; they have a reputation for that kind of

"slip up" occurring from time to time. The pig looks like it's smoking marijuana for a reason, I'm told.

Normally, however, letting a band's current location slip out over the air can get a DJ suspended and/or fined. It doesn't usually provide the police with a reason to get involved, but in our instance there was some question as to whether it was a relatively innocent grab for ratings or intentional aid to the enemy.

Likewise, the police were still gathering evidence from the hotel itself. As something of a security measure, we'd been given rooms near the top of the building, some of which were now open to the sky. Fortunately, the structural damage had been confined above the 24th floor, allowing most of the other guests to return to their rooms without major safety concerns, but the necessity of shoring up the top three floors before the police could risk spending much time on the crime scene had undoubtedly destroyed a significant amount of evidence.

Had a civilian managed to make it past the 25th floor on the elevator the afternoon that Replay regained consciousness, he probably would have been arrested the instant he tried to step off, however mistakenly. Certainly he could have been forgiven for looking once and deciding that it would be simpler and cheaper to destroy the damaged floors altogether than to repair them. The biggest shards of glass that clung precariously to warped and broken frames were scarcely larger than a quarter, most of them hazed or chipped where needles had impacted before bouncing away. One interior wall, only partially standing, bore a silhouette in unmarked plaster, mute testimony to where Replay had been standing when the blast occurred. Two separate forensics teams were working the site, not an officer among them who wasn't on edge. The possibility of someone getting stuck by one of the thousands of flechettes was on everyone's mind, a far more immediate threat than any shifting the building might do.

The photographer was finished with the initial scene photos well before anyone had tried to touch anything, of course, and had shot a second set after the temporary pillars had been put in place. The flechettes had actually made things easier for the police in one respect; with some of us on the scene long before the photos could be arranged for, those tiny projectiles made it obvious where items had been disturbed before the scene had been secured. There was only the exact position of a white Stratocaster guitar to be accounted for, which seemed insignificant at present and very likely to remain so; it would not have been an issue at all if Perfect Tommy hadn't been captured on home video leaving the scene with it. Since that amateur tape was the only public footage anyone had of us since the incident, it had played heavily on the local news stations, much to the frustration of detectives, who too-frequently found themselves speaking to people who wanted to question them about the tape rather than to potential witnesses.

In truth, detective Sergeant Harrison, was finding little but frustration in being in charge of the case. The high-profile nature of the incident would have made dealing with the media difficult enough even if no celebrities had been involved. Too, a good number of his fellow officers were inordinately interested in the slightest discovery, so there were more than the usual number of precinct house rumors flying about. Speculation seemed to be the order of the day everywhere he turned. There were only two things he had no doubts about at present. One was that he was getting too old for this stuff. The other was that it would get worse before it got any better.

Normally, the forensics teams would have been long finished by this point too, which at least would have gotten the media off his back for a couple days, but the same structural damage which had compounded their chain-of-evidence worries had kept them out of the site for well over 24 hours. Normally, there would only have been one team, and normally, it wouldn't have taken the better part of two days once they had gotten in. They would have gone about the routine business of picking up everything portable from dust bunnies to ceiling tiles and carted all of it off to the labs a long time ago. This was where the flechettes themselves were causing concern on a second level. No one wanted to end up with one of the tiny needles in a finger, even if it was the "clean" end; they were scarcely larger than a medium splinter and devilishly difficult to remove without magnification. Pulling one out of a hand would have been enough of a problem, but preserving them as evidence had proven to be positively nightmarish. If retrieving them hadn't been difficult enough, there was also the question of how to secure them safely for transport and storage.

For the present, they were using a stainless steel chafing dish liberated from the hotel's kitchen, but Harrison was debating the wisdom of even dealing with the projectiles for at least the thirtieth time since lunch. They should have been using hazmat gear for that, or at least have brought in some MPs from Ft. Leonard Wood who were qualified in NBC suits. He was debating what choice words he was going to have with the Chief about it when his train of thought was derailed by a distinctive tone coming from his two-way radio. Just what he needed. Weather. Time to pack it in before the storm tore hell out of his crime scene.

Chapter Four

"Um, Reno..."

I looked up at Wayback, just a little surprised. It wasn't like him to sound so uncertain. "Yeah?"

"You guys think it's my fault, don't you?"

Having ridden with Buckaroo under considerably stranger circumstances than this, I managed to answer him before he got the wrong idea. "If you had it that under control, somebody in D.C. would have you locked up in a hole so the Soviets couldn't get their hands on you. We're lucky Replay saw it as soon as she did." If we hadn't still been in the restaurant, I might have been more specific. Then again, with Wayback, maybe not.

"That's just it. I should have seen something that big days ahead of time. Or maybe I did and went looking for an excuse not to be there when it went down." No doubt about it; either he was feeling guilty or convinced he should have been.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," I told him. "Tommy's the only one around with a perfect reputation to live up to. Besides, even if you were excuse-hunting, you kept Buckaroo out of things. Some of us think that's worth a brownie point or two." Replay in particular would have held that opinion, although I didn't think saying so would help. "Any possibility she might have been catching someone's intent? Not really being clairvoyant?"

He had to think about that for a moment. "Theoretically, I suppose so. If the bomber was still nearby, almost certainly it's possible. We hadn't gotten an absolute limit on her range with people she knew yet, but I'd think anywhere in

the building would have been sufficient. Depending on how focused he was on causing trouble, maybe a block would have been."

"Then she didn't ruin your reputation or start a new one of her own. How far along were you with testing, or is that still a closed subject?"

"A moot one, I think. She was always well-shielded, but I knew she was there before. Tracking was possible, if sometimes difficult. Now --" He shook his head mournfully. "I've met concrete walls with higher levels of psionic ability."

For a moment I was tempted to tell him that he was one of the reasons Replay had finally come back, just to see what reaction the news would get. Like every other intern and no few apprentices, he knew the story of why she'd put so much distance between herself and us. Unlike most of them, however, we'd given him an idea of what to expect from her based on what we'd known her talents to be prior to her earlier encounter with talava. That it was estimation and guesswork at best could not be avoided; even Buckaroo had known there were probably skills she'd possessed we simply hadn't seen yet. Possibly she had abilities she wasn't even aware of; almost certainly she hadn't achieved her full potential with those talents she had demonstrated.

Wayback had scarcely agreed to test her present limitations when she'd started blowing all our assumptions away at their first meeting. She'd arrived at the main house weary and travel worn, a full three hours behind schedule and wearing the bruises and split lip one might have expected to see on an assault victim. The smug look on her face at the time fairly screamed that she was the last one standing at the end of whatever brouhaha had occurred, and her first words were for Buckaroo, whom she told she was finally convinced that it was okay for her to be back, or the Bravos wouldn't have met her at the airport. If she was already a threat to us, why had they been there at all? Lindbergh was only slightly more forthcoming in regard to the fight, which had indeed ended with only the two of them left upright, although in his case it had been just barely; dispatched to La Guardia to pick her up, he'd felt compelled to lend his assistance and thus had likewise drawn the ire of bravos and thus the attention of the airport police, but I digress.

There had been other telepaths in Wayback's life before he came to the Institute, but none of them had been in his own league, which naturally enough had led him to believe he was very possibly the best. At first blush, Replay had seemed so completely open and transparent that she couldn't possibly have much of a gift, regardless of what we'd told him. This first impression had been so outside his own experience as to confuse him rather badly; indeed, he could have been forgiven for mistaking her for the stereotyped "bubble-headed bleach blonde" in spite of her coloration. If that hadn't been enough to have made him start wondering what he'd gotten himself into, she'd further demolished our collective expectations by managing to tell him verbatim what he'd been thinking in spite of his own shields.

Startled, but game, he'd vanished into his lab for the rest of the day, only to reemerge the next morning and declare open testing season on her. After several weeks, she'd gotten comfortable enough with him for joking around a bit, some of it relatively public. She'd actually begun to think they were on the verge of finally learning something she didn't already know, and then a hotel blew up in her face.

"You don't suppose she's --?"

He cut me off. "No. Once I knew she could shield like that, I learned what I was looking for. The only hope I have for her recovering this time would be if it's equivalent to light blindness. If it's just a matter of the channels shutting down from shock, there's a chance. If there's real damage, then this is permanent. She might not be able to deal with it."

Knowing the lady as I did, I doubted she'd go as far around the bend as he was hinting, at least in the short term. "So you've seen this before?"

"Just the opposite, I'm afraid. Someone I was closer to than I should have gotten. He drank himself to death trying to block the world out for a few hours. I can't imagine that losing the talent you've always had could be any easier than trying to deal with suddenly gaining the untrained equivalent." He looked at his coffee mug as though he wanted to throw it, or anything else he could get a good grip on, through the window just to release some of his frustration. "I can't expect you to understand what she's going through. I'm not sure I understand; I barely remember what it was like before I grew up to be a telepath. Even if I did, I couldn't explain it. The language just doesn't exist."

"Not in words," I agreed. "She's been known to refer to the sensory deprivation tank as something of a metaphor-by-example." I could not help but wonder what Buckaroo would make of this conversation, and began to realize we might collectively have more pieces to the puzzle than any one of us realized. "You don't know how to tell how bad it is for certain, do you?"

"Not a clue."

Much has been made in certain circles of the Institute's security -- or lack thereof -- in the aftermath of our first encounter with Lectroids, and rightly so. Even while the popular press was hailing us as heroes for our successful resolution of that situation, our detractors were bemoaning the fact that we'd permitted it to occur at all. Yet to the best of our collective knowledge, nowhere was the subject pursued farther than among ourselves; being rather forcefully informed that the measures we had taken to date were insufficient was something we'd taken personally. A great deal of debate and no small amount of research had been given over to the issue of exactly what level of security was prudent. Ultimately, we'd realized that we were dealing with the same dilemma faced by anyone with a new automobile or house; if the other guy wanted in badly enough, it was going to happen, and the entire trick was to know he was there so he could be dealt with.

This did not mean that we left things as they had been; far from it. Some of the new safeguards we came up with have been patented and are presently in use by various security agencies throughout the world, as result of which, many people sleep better at night with the certainty that their countries are not being run by aliens from Planet 10. Other changes to our facilities are even less visible to the naked eye, and although some of these are perhaps known to various outsiders, I will not be drawn into a discussion of them here. Overall, however, our biggest objective had been to improve our collective safety as seamlessly as possible, and I am pleased to be able to report that very few of the new measures caused anyone problems of a significant nature.

The real shift, however, has not been so much in procedures or premises as in attitudes. We are perhaps more aware of our surroundings when off campus than we

had routinely been before, and if public reaction is any indicator, rather more subtle about that alertness than in years past. Undoubtedly, such interns as Wayback are as much responsible for that low-key approach to these issues as the lessons Yoyodyne taught us are, and I have no doubt that our gypsy residents are likewise involved. If some of our personal precautions seem a bit unconventional, they are nonetheless effective enough to have become routine, if not always habitual.

Certainly security was a particularly pertinent issue to the residents at this most recent briefing. Buckaroo looked around the lounge casually enough, making sure everyone he needed to see was accounted for. He'd just realized who was missing when Lindbergh arrived unannounced. "Rawhide says to tell you that you may be right," the pilot reported. "He said he was working on it."

"He know I wanted him up here?"

"I think he's planning to stay with her until this --" He was interrupted by thunder from a lightning strike near enough to shock a couple people who had their feet resting on metal chair legs. "Is over. They're down in the boiler room. Any reason I should know about why she doesn't like storms?"

"Maybe he'd better," Buckaroo allowed. "The last thing we want is to add to her paranoia. Wayback says it's not a problem anymore, but I'm not placing bets." This made things awkward, not so much because Rawhide wasn't at hand as because the pilot was. It was risky enough sharing what little he knew with the residents, even after having the room checked for bugs for the umpteenth time. Still, Lindbergh understood better than most of us what Wayback was and wasn't capable of overhearing, and Rawhide was much less likely to have Replay become a problem he couldn't cope with.

"You aren't here, and this isn't happening," he said after a moment's hesitation.

"I can live with that," said the pilot. "Won't be the first time." He came all the way in and sat down. He'd flown contract work for several outfits before joining us, some of them a bit on the questionable side however official they were; we believed him.

Buckaroo nodded. "Big Norse, you'll need to get Rawhide to speed on this."

The blonde communications expert didn't bother turning down her personal stereo before she answered; she wasn't there merely because she'd been involved from the beginning, although even Lindbergh's checkered past hadn't prepared him to expect her other purpose. "Not a problem." She still blushed rather easily, but not when business was involved. The fact that it was common knowledge around the Institute that she and Rawhide might have a mutual thing going on was wonderful cover under the circumstances; Wayback was probably even less inclined to eavesdrop on what he believed to be a romantic interlude than on a headblind telepath. "I'll drop it in with the other updates."

"Good," Buckaroo said and began to speak in earnest. "Tommy told most of you she was going to make it. Right now, apart from exhaustion, she's in good shape. Physically, this was much easier on everyone than last time. No convulsions apart from the detox reaction, and the punctures didn't try to go septic this time, although some of them are still scabbed over. "Mentally, I don't know. Something set her off about ten minutes before she came to, but we're still not sure what caused it, just that she didn't want it around."

"Harmonics blew the windows and some of the equipment," Perfect Tommy admitted. If any of the glass had chanced to land on him, he'd long since brushed it off. "Not much serious damage, but quite a show. Scared hell out of Wayback." No one but Lindbergh seemed surprised to hear that.

"Not just Wayback," said Big Norse, which was completely unexpected. "We caught some of it on the bus and had a time deciding it was local. Evidently the monitor had more of an RF signature than we knew." The EKG monitor she referred to had started out life as a standard model, but whether the modifications we'd done had affected its radio frequency interference was something that bore investigating. Replay had been known to react badly to less.

"Unfortunately, we have a bigger problem than equipment or water damage, or her being headblind." Buckaroo went on. If he'd stopped to think about what he was saying, he might not have gotten this far. "She's got too much time missing."

"Brain damage?" New Jersey brought up the question, but it wasn't far from anyone else's mind.

"Doesn't look like it, unless I'm way behind on my reading. This is too selective. Right now, I'm convinced she doesn't belong to Xan, but she's not the woman we know, either." The rest was almost an afterthought, as subdued in volume as it was in tone. "And we know her a lot better than she knows us."

"Amnesia, maybe?" Lindbergh recovered the power of speech first, perhaps because he had so few preconceptions. He'd only known Replay for a few weeks, not for the years everyone else in the room had.

Buckaroo shook his head. "Doesn't fit the pattern. I want to do more checks, but as far as I can tell, she's not missing just one block of days; this is spread out over years, and every hour of it involves us. The Replay persona just isn't there."

"Does that mean she's not Jet either?" Pecos gave Tommy an odd look as she asked that question.

Buckaroo nodded. "Closer to it, but a fair amount of that persona's gone too. My best guess is that this is who she is at home. Which means that calling her Lightfoot is probably a very bad idea." Tommy stared at his shoes at that. New Jersey whistled. Pecos and Big Norse both winced at the thought of the reaction 'lightfoot' was apt to get out-of-context even if it was still meant as the compliment Tommy'd intended the first time he'd said it.

"Wait a minute," Lindbergh protested. "Somebody wanna loan me a quarter to buy a clue with?" He knew the term *persona*, but the context threw him. It simply wasn't something he'd ever thought to have to deal with around the Institute, though technically, many of the names we were accustomed to using could be called aliases. "On second thought, make that a roll of quarters." He hadn't seen Tommy behaving like this before, but was convinced the engineer had something to do with the present situation. "And point me at the machine."

"Lo Pep turned up in California a few months back with Xan's latest overthrunder prototype," Buckaroo began, which made so much less sense to Lindbergh that the pilot took it to be the beginning of the whole story. "From what we could put together afterward, we think this one was intended to be a man-portable, statically emplaced unit which would generate a crossover field you could

literally walk through without needing room to slow down on the other side. More of a gate than ours, evidently meant specifically for breaching walls."

"Zero escape velocity?" Lindbergh said. The concept alone would have been astounding if any of us had proposed it; with Hanoi Xan involved, it became frightening.

"The real 'render all conventional defense perimeters useless' thing, " said Perfect Tommy. "We can't prove it, but we think the first test may have been the Modesto PD evidence lockers. Which could mean that it's a heavy piece of equipment or that it vibrates quite a bit when it's activated, because something registered on the seismographs in the middle of the night before they discovered they had a problem." No longer in the papers, the strange incident had been a media field day for some several weeks at the time. The chain-of-evidence so crucial in prosecutions had been sundered for more than 300 items housed in a single locker, most of them related either directly to the World Crime League or to those who owed various League bosses favors. In spite of the massive number of evidence tags apparently switched at random, no one had seen or heard anything apart from the strange seismograph tapes and a garbage truck hitting a light standard across the street (which had proven completely unrelated). The few items completely missing from the lockers have yet to be located more than six months later.

"We know they must have tested it somewhere, or Lo Pep wouldn't have been trying to use it himself," said Buckaroo. "Fortunately for us, it turned out to be more hazardous than they thought. We might not have known until much later if the field had been stable. As far as we know, that line of research has been abandoned, maybe permanently."

Lindbergh relaxed considerably. The notion that Xan's bravos might literally have come through the Institute walls one night without warning would have been enough to disturb any sane person in the country, for what would keep them from stopping at that? Why not the White House, or Fort Knox? But since they apparently didn't have the capability, he could still go to sleep in reasonable safety. "I don't suppose they ended up in the Phantom Zone," he joked, only a bit lamely.

The looks the residents flashed back and forth for a moment didn't escape his notice completely. "That would have been too simple," said Pecos. "Simple doesn't happen around some of us much, if you haven't noticed." She might have said more but there was a momentary shadow on the other side of the frosted glass in the door.

Chapter Five

If I have seemed a bit remiss in the matter of Jet Lightfoot in previous chronicles, it has largely been deliberate. She is particularly alert to her personal security, which is hardly unique for someone in her profession, but her take on privacy is definitely off center by most standards. Never have I seen her less than appropriately composed in front of a camera or media microphone; no matter the circumstances, she has always had a rapport with journalists, DJs, and VJs which some people in the business thirty years or more never attain. Were this not the case, I have no doubt that she might well have had considerably more difficulty remaining in the United States, but the issue of her immigration status, long settled now, was much in the papers at the time and I feel no great need to discuss it here.

For the benefit of those new to these chronicles, however, I will recap what I have previously said about her background, inasmuch as some of it is pertinent here. We first met her unexpectedly almost nine months after the events of Across the Eighth Dimension. A troop of Bravos were laying an ambush for our encampment at the time; noticing only that there were civilian campers in the wood, the lady set things in motion before they were properly positioned. Certain of her actions warned us things were amiss, giving us the chance to be ready for it when the first gunshots were fired. When she was wounded during the engagement, the soft body armor we found her in left little question that she belonged on the side of the angels.

Buckaroo, of course, took it upon himself to see to her welfare, and it was not long before he introduced her to us as Jet. Within a matter of weeks she'd settled in as much as any of the interns and was re-working her armor for our benefit. Some five months later, what initially appeared to be an earthquake demolished a bar we played a charity show in one night, taking several people below street level with it, Jet included. As the only one that involved who wasn't still in the hospital, she was interviewed a few days later, and one of Hanoi Xan's lieutenants named Deng Fat passed the tape on to his master with several choice comments about this intern being someone with either far too much luck or far too much talent to ignore. Xan had taken immediate notice, although at the time only she expected that the interview might somehow make its way to Sabah. She watched her back accordingly from the moment she stepped out of the studio; to that point, she had no firm reason to believe he'd noticed her, but she hadn't stayed alive as long as she had by taking unnecessary risks.

Nor was it luck that she was healthy enough to do the interview to begin with. There are those who've accused her of thinking she's some kind of superhuman. The fact of the matter is that she's very aware of her own limitations (hence the body armor, the likes of which we'd never seen before) and despite appearances, being human isn't one of them. This above all inclines her to cherish her privacy; while we're unlikely to make a guinea pig of anyone, there are those in our own government who'd love the chance in her case. As it was, she was injured frequently enough in the time she spent with us that Buckaroo has done significant physiological studies on the female of her species, both with and without her active and knowledgeable assistance. By the day she left to return to her own folk, she was as much family as any resident has ever been, and as sorely missed by those of us who knew her.

For others, of course, she was neither fish nor fowl. While it is true that some people who come to the Institute never make it past intern status, we had never before had anyone leave after making their residency. This put her in the rather awkward position in two respects: firstly, that she was to some degree abandoning her second family in favor of her first, and secondly, that our new personnel didn't always react well toward her on the rare occasions when she could be with us. Certainly it did not help her any that most of those visits coincided with trouble of one kind or another; although he'd never knowingly met her, Wayback was but one of several folk well convinced she was at best a stormcrow.

Lindbergh, on the other hand, had rather more of an open mind on the issue. Where he was concerned, anyone in intelligence was deserving of careful scrutiny and could be fish one day and fowl the next without warning. Or not; one was never really certain. Best to keep one's attention to oneself and one's mouth shut. On the other hand, if we were sure enough of her to make it clear we still considered her a resident, then Jet was a special case. Very possibly, trouble found her more often than the other way about. Certainly that would explain why

Buckaroo was admitting that we scarcely knew the woman he'd learned to think of as Replay. It also very much justified Pecos's remark that bravos inhabiting the Phantom Zone would have been too easy an occurrence. He'd never actively intended to get caught up in intelligence operations, but Lindbergh had been on the edges of enough of them to know that the best use of the word 'simple' in that context was in describing people who thought the days of cloak-and-dagger would come to a screeching halt if the Soviet Union ever fell.

Evidently Buckaroo had expected to hear Pecos comment further, for when she fell silent, he took note of her gaze. The shadow which had been against the glass a moment before was gone by the time he looked, but rather than writing it off as her nerves working overtime, he started toward the door for a better view. "Hold that thought," Big Norse said before he was halfway there, her own attention rather less elsewhere than an eavesdropper might have expected from the tone. "I've lost the carrier."

"Checking," Pecos said almost immediately, trying her own go-phone only to discover that while the screen lit up enough to prove the batteries weren't low, there was far too much static and flicker to make out an image. She had to bring the audio all the way up to get anything at first, then hastily backed it down again when the device produced only static hiss and high-pitched squeals. "Someone knows where we are."

It was hardly necessary to say more. From Buckaroo himself to the newest intern on the tour, we'd all known that this was at best a temporary solution to our housing problem and the main thing it had going for it in terms of physical security was the fact that it was officially unoccupied but not yet up for sale, hence as nearly invisible as was possible for several acres of Church property to be. Quite apart from the handful of local Blue Blaze Irregulars who'd managed to provide us with minimal amenities in the space of a couple hours on no advance notice, we knew of only 2 police officers who were privy to our exact location. Still, as we well knew, Xan's spies could be almost anywhere and if it wasn't good fortune that had allowed us this much time undisturbed, then it was assuredly part of his master plan somehow.

Under the circumstances, no one considered a simple malfunction to be the likely explanation. Go-phones are hardy devices; they have to be to survive some of the field conditions we encounter. While it's true that landing hard on one after a long fall will usually do damage, they've been known to transmit after such treatment, and dead batteries are the largest obstacle we face with them on a routine basis. Unfortunately, like so many other electronic communication systems, they're no more immune to jamming than to electromagnetic pulses.

Knowing you're about to be under attack and being able to do anything about it, however, are sometimes two completely different things. Buckaroo spent a moment examining the door as closely as he dared without opening it, then tried the knob when he saw nothing alarming. To everyone's surprise, it turned to no effect. Using both hands and putting body weight behind it didn't help. "Locked?" Perfect Tommy wondered. If that was the problem, it was almost solved already.

"Jammed. It's not even moving."

Lindbergh got up and took his chair with him, setting it on the floor again close to the door. "Let me try. I used to be good at this."

"This I gotta see," said Tommy. Buckaroo stepped back, and the pilot leaned in close to the door frame, which he began to tap with one fist. About a third of the way down the latch edge of the frame he dug into the adjacent wall with a fingernail, leaving a slight mark.

"Can I have about another foot?" he asked Buckaroo. "Wouldn't wanna hit anything by accident." He didn't wait for an answer, but hefted the chair by the legs and swung it at the doorframe, aiming at the spot he'd marked a moment before. The entire wall shuddered under the impact, but something fell to the floor on the other side of the door, bounced metallically a few times, and was silent. The chair was on the ground again before the bouncing stopped, and he had his Beretta in hand before he tried the doorknob.

This time the door came open, revealing a hall that was completely empty except for three pennies laying in the floor, one of the coins rather obviously having seen better days. (Later examination would reveal a penny-sized indentation in the door at precisely the altitude Lindbergh had struck the frame, but I digress.) "Pecos, Big Norse, back Rawhide," said Buckaroo, getting back to business. "Tommy, see what you can do about raising Reno. Get them back here if you can. Sidney, you take the north end; get people together and meet me at the bus. I'll take the south end."

While Wayback and Lindbergh disagreed as to whether Jet was trouble on two feet, Rawhide knew enough of undercover work from personal experience to understand that things didn't often go entirely as planned. While he hadn't particularly had any qualms about Replay's background, he wasn't especially surprised that things were threatening to fall completely apart; no battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy, and there was little reason at present to presume this should be any different even if Wayback wasn't precisely that kind of a problem. The cover she'd been operating under very successfully for the last few weeks wasn't likely to be something we could reassemble for her quickly enough to keep our intern telepath from discovering the relatively minor deception, and the last thing she needed at present was anyone harassing her, justified in their suspicions or not.

Just now, it was all he could do to keep her firmly focused. There was no doubt in his mind that she had every right to be a little worried even before the weather had rolled in; if she hadn't been running at least a little nervous, he'd be a lot more concerned about her sanity. As it was, he wasn't certain we'd defined the real problem yet; her admission that she wasn't altogether sure she'd really dealt with Indigo's flashbacks was only a symptom of something much bigger. Why was it that she could remember the troubled ex-Ranger and her own pencil work, but draw obvious blanks on everyone she'd seen since waking? And why didn't she remember Raven, who was as much a part of her daily routine at home as Indigo? As far as that went, what other things was she likely to surprise us with by remembering?

For that matter, he was beginning to wonder if he was even dealing with her as Jet, either. From watching her on stage, in the field, and around campus, he knew she'd always been a social chameleon; who was to say that she wasn't as much a different person among her own? Very like Jet, perhaps, the way her routine operations were very like those at the Institute, but still recognizably different to someone who knew her both places; certainly the cover persona she'd been using was distinguishable in spite of drawing on most of her real history with us for its background. And undoubtedly some of her behavior was going to be

dictated by plain old ordinary physics regardless of issues of the society she was interacting in. The storm was excellent example of that.

A notion occurred to him. "Raven deal with Indigo at that close a range?"

"Beats me," she confessed. "The name doesn't ring bells."

"Medic-mechanic. Couple inches shorter and a little younger than you, same natural coloration, wears her hair in one long braid, and acts like she's running your show." Under the circumstances, using terms that the lady at hand would know seemed wisest; in that context, a 'mechanic' was equally likely to tend to the care and maintenance of automobiles, aircraft, or cyborgs. In this case, he definitely intended the latter.

She said a name he'd only heard once or twice, one Raven only let family use; had he been an intern, he probably wouldn't have recognized it at all. "Has to be, or you wouldn't be bringing age into it." He nodded. "Oh, yeah, she's been at close range. Takes it better than I do; she doesn't have ghosts from Nam of her own. Proves who's got the higher IQ, don't it?" If she'd made that kind of remark under more normal circumstances, it would have been a potshot at her own expense. He had doubts if she was egotistical at all unless a cover identity demanded it.

As it was, her tone worried him. Letting her get maudlin on top of paranoid wasn't a good idea under the best of circumstances. "Wouldn't know," he assured her. "I wasn't there. We were just getting off the ground back then."

"Talk to me about that," she said, surprising him a bit. "I need background I haven't got." If she seemed just a little on the verge of desperate, at least that was better than depression. "How much did I used to know?"

"Maybe more than we think," he admitted, "maybe less. You're hard to call some times. The first time Raven met Buckaroo, she said that you and he were too much alike."

"That explains a lot by itself." It was probably the last reaction he would have expected. She sounded distant for that moment, but it was a distance he recognized; she was suddenly able to put a lot of pieces in place at once. Even if they probably weren't a perfect fit, he'd just handed her a larger chunk of what she'd been asking about than he'd realized at first. When she spoke again, she was much more aware of her words. "I bet I've been known to pull his rank, too."

"Mostly on him. 'Medic's privilege'." Though he didn't say so, New Jersey had been known to invoke that particular right as well; even Buckaroo understood that we were better off in the long run if our medical personnel could override anyone whose judgment was questionable due to illness or injury.

"If he's as hard to treat as I've been, *someone* needs to." That much, at least, she was absolutely positive of. Social chameleon or not, one thing he knew she was always serious about was medicine; she'd been known to risk her own safety to treat wounded if it was a matter of life and death. Considering the way she usually reacted to legitimate threats to our security, he would not have been surprised to find out she'd try to keep the world away from her patients with nothing more than a pocket knife if it came to that.

"You're worse about not knowing you're wounded than he is," Rawhide assured her, "but try keeping him in bed when he's sick."

"That's one thing I'm not at the moment, if you're wondering. If I was, I wouldn't be hungry yet. Not that I plan on looking for the lunchroom around here until the sky calms down some."

"You've got a clue where you are, then?" As the bomb was probably the last thing she'd seen before Buckaroo had carried her out of the hotel unconscious, he hadn't expected it of her.

"Only from the architecture and the smells. If it was still a school, we wouldn't be here this time of year, would we? Kids would've been dissecting frogs in that science lab, not Buckaroo sitting there wondering how far gone I really was. And if I was close to having my head on completely straight, we wouldn't be in this boiler room wishing the lightning would quit; we'd be miles up the road somewhere a *lot* more securable if I had any say in the matter."

He'd only just opened his mouth to reply when the building trembled from a direct hit and the lights went off. She swore, a single soft but heartfelt word in her mother tongue, more pain and startlement than frustration in her voice. He'd known she had a good reason for disliking thunderstorms and written it off until now as nothing more serious than any other pilot might develop. If nearby lightning was actually painful for her, that was another matter altogether, one he didn't have time to consider for long before he heard the faint scuff of someone trying to come down the stairs without being noticed.

It was just possible that those feet were friendly, not trying to avoid his attention, just cautious of a possible enemy presence already down here. In the dark like this, he didn't dare shoot first and ask questions later; a warning round aimed at the floor or a shot tried for real that inadvertently struck the wall could bounce as easily as penetrate the concrete in this room. Either one could get one of the good guys hurt badly and he wasn't about to take that kind of chance until he had no other option. Fabric rustled much closer to hand, the lady doing something with her blanket that was more appropriate than wearing it. She admitted much later that she was on the verge of throwing it at the intruder as a distraction when a voice she knew from home whispered in the darkness.

Chapter Six

A bare whisper came from the speakers to either side of the screen. Xan opened his mouth to order his pawn to repeat the call, louder this time, but was saved the effort by a female voice responding to the whisper. So, Replay was alert enough to catch such a trifling noise; he must take that into consideration if the time came to make any future attempt on her life. "Authenticate," she said from somewhere ahead in the darkness, still beyond the range of the spy's vision, hence beyond Xan's view as well. It seemed a strange choice of words for a woman of her age, although it was possible she'd learned it from the Black Beret.

"Answer her," Xan ordered. At least this spy was likely to know what she meant by it. The military was such a wonderful resource; one needed only to recruit, not train.

"Holograms killed the video star," said the spy, no longer whispering, but still at much less than normal volume.

"Mary had a little nerf," Replay's voice answered; "come ahead, wayward son." Sign and countersign were both unfamiliar to Xan, which was a little surprising; he should have known all of Team Banzai's current codes. Unless, of course, this was something that went back long before he'd 'recruited' the man, something that had been in the rotation but never used.

"On me, Dingo." Rawhide's voice, normal volume, almost as far away as Replay. So much the better. Banzai's second in command still suspected nothing amiss.

"Coming in," said Dingo, and started forward cautiously. Even with his own night vision enhanced somewhat as a byproduct of the optics in the control implant, there was scarcely enough light for him to make out the floor more than two steps ahead; Xan might have cursed the fact that neither of them had much view, but he was too intent on the objective at hand. Replay had heard what she'd expected to hear; she'd trust his pawn until it was much too late.

It was not until the little picture there was on the screen wavered and went completely dark that Xan began to realize it wasn't as much of a sure thing as he'd thought. The last signal the implant transmitted was the muzzle flash and report of a single gunshot.

Replay, or perhaps I should say Jet, had expected a familiar phrase from Dingo, though she hadn't known that was what we called him until Rawhide had confirmed her suggestion he join them. While Dingo's reply had certainly been familiar, it hadn't been close to what she'd wanted to hear; among her own, any reference to the first video ever played on MTV, tech-skewed or otherwise, was a warning that things were not what they seemed to be anymore than the music video channel had been what the pundits had expected. The phrase "wayward son" was one of a dozen or more she could have used to confirm she'd gotten his real message, and in part a secondary message to Rawhide she hoped he'd understand given circumstances. Before the newcomer had been called Dingo, he'd been one of her people.

Rawhide had decided she knew him almost from the time she'd responded to Dingo's voice. No surprise there, really; if we'd ever met anyone from her territory who didn't know her, we were unaware of the fact. If Jet wanted to call him in despite her earlier paranoias, Rawhide was prepared to back her on it, but her apparent accusation that the man was off his assigned station wasn't normal. As far as he knew, she'd known Dingo had hooked up with us and approved of the informal arrangement, her only caveat to it being that we not hang the obvious handle on him since it was far too likely to cause confusion in the field.

"Company," said Jet, pitching her voice for Rawhide's ears alone; with Dingo coming toward them as gracelessly as one might expect of a nearly blind man, she wasn't worried that he'd overhear either that or the soft rasp of metal on leather as she pulled Rawhide's pistol from its holster. The single word would have been enough explanation for any of us to have allowed that so long as she seemed coherent; just now it was abundantly clear that she had something specific in mind. Barring only Cameo, she was probably the most experienced nightfighter among us. If she thought she had use for the gun, it was not something Rawhide wanted to argue, not without backup.

Dingo came through the door headfirst, helped into that angle by Jet's outstretched foot across the doorway; he landed on the concrete, hands out, only to take a surprisingly gentle blow to the ribs that knocked him to the floor. He

had time enough to thank the heavens that Xan hadn't told him how to answer her before a muzzle flash lit the room. His ears were still ringing with the report of the shot when a wave of cold that didn't come from the floor washed over him, taking awareness with it.

The echoes of that shot traveled farther than they might have in the open; concrete walls being notoriously unforgiving surfaces for sound, Pecos and Big Norse heard it while they were still several feet short of the stairway. Both of them pulled their own sidearms immediately, moving for the relative cover of the wall but still making their way toward the source of the shot. "Rawhide," Pecos said quietly, recognizing the sound of his revolver. If he was shooting at something, chances were good that he'd hit his target, but that didn't entirely negate the possibility that there weren't other problems downstairs. With the lights out, neither of the two women were happy about having to deal with the steps, but they weren't about to pull out flashlights and make targets of themselves before they had a better grasp of what was happening.

They reached the stairwell without further incident, Pecos in the lead. She was halfway down, Big Norse on her heels, before they heard Rawhide's own exasperated reaction to whatever had happened.

"What the hell was *that* for?"

Jet answered him without hesitation or ire. "So I stand half a chance finding out what's wrong around here. *Something's* not right with this guy; that's a given."

Reassured they weren't about to walk into an ambush, Pecos and Big Norse relaxed slightly, enough to be sure they could bring out lights. "Rawhide? You guys okay?" Pecos asked.

"Two of us are," came the mildly annoyed answer. "Dingo's been shot." He wasn't ready to rebuke Jet without hearing her explanation, but he wasn't at all happy either.

"He thinks he has," Jet countered, "and there's a 50/50 chance who ever was running him thinks so too. If I'd wanted him dead, I coulda broke his neck as easy."

"Buckaroo sent us to make sure you got to the bus," said Pecos. "We thought you were being attacked." She sent the beam of her flashlight into the boiler room door, revealing Dingo on the floor, unconscious but otherwise intact. Jet took advantage of it to hand Rawhide back his gun and drop down for a closer look at her recent target.

"You may've been right," she said after a moment, "except that he used to be one of mine before he got a little too hot to hide reliably. Too many holes in the Protected Witness Program in my neck of the woods. Couldn't tell you now where staff sent him, but at one point I'd've known." Preoccupied with the man on the floor, she wasn't fully aware that she might be saying too much; then again, she might have presumed Rawhide would say something if that was a potential problem. "Don't ask how, but I know he wasn't operating undercover, so telling me not to trust appearances was something he'd have saved for an audience unless he meant he wasn't as much in control as it looked."

"Xan," said Big Norse; "Go-phones and main comm are jammed."

"I could learn to hate that man real quick," said Jet. "Someone wanna put that light right here?"

In spite of the possibility of further threat, they all looked where she indicated. At the back of Dingo's neck, normally covered by his hair, there was a faint scar that she didn't recognize and evidently mistrusted. "Just like Captain Happen," said Pecos. "We found electronics then too, after he was dead. Not as obvious as talava."

"Not as effective, either, or Xan would have had the drop on us," Jet admitted. "I do **not** want to go out there, but it's getting to be too iffy around here. Any chance the medics can keep Willie sedated for awhile?"

"No problem there," Rawhide assured her at the same time Big Norse and Pecos both asked, "Willie?"

"The name he had where I know him from is William Peters. Man hates worse than anything to be called Willie. Can't say I blame him." She started to stand up, froze in place with her entire attention for something beyond the door.

While Pecos and Big Norse had headed directly for the basement when the briefing broke up, Buckaroo had started checking rooms in the south end of the building, collecting interns as he found them and sending them back to the bus in small groups. He'd just reached the halfway point of his section when he heard a single shot and recognized whose weapon it had come from. Under better circumstances, he could have expected an almost instant situation report, but with the go-phones inoperative for the duration, his first response was to head for the nearest stairwell. He went down those stairs like a driven man, silent only by virtue of long practice, actively seeking the enemy more as a threat to his people than as a personal one.

Coming in as he did from the far end of the basement from the boiler room, he missed a good part of the early conversation. Once he was able to hear them, however, the voices reassured him somewhat even before he was close enough to make out what the subject was. Even so, it troubled him that no one was headed for the bus. Rawhide, Pecos, and Big Norse all spoke simultaneously, then Jet answered, only the words "Can't say I blame him," intelligible. A moment more passed while he covered perhaps another ten feet, then Jet's voice drifted to him again. "It's Buckaroo."

"You tracking again?" Rawhide asked her, startled. Buckaroo could almost see the look on his friend's face.

"Only if you count audio, " she answered. She'd have a particularly disgusted expression to go along with that tone of voice, one she generally reserved for her own failings, however temporary; right now she had plenty to be frustrated about. "And I can tell you there's only five upright bodies down here so far. If we have to move, might be nice to do it before we draw a crowd."

Apart from such operators as commercial airlines and major freight shippers, relatively few of the aircraft one sees bearing corporate logos these days actually belong to the companies they purport to represent. There are few enterprises which can justify the expense of operating and maintaining large planes, especially those which are only needed occasionally. It is therefore common practice among the corporate sector to lease aircraft if needed, often

with a flight crew as part of the contract. This is especially true if the corporation involved expects to need the plane on an infrequent basis over a long period, where tax considerations also come into play.

Among his other flying jobs, Lindbergh had been the junior man on one such flight crew before joining us, taking his orders from a major brewery. It had been a position where his youth had counted against him in several respects, foremost among them being that he lacked the years of experience as an aerial bus-driver that might have put him in line to captain his own plane. We had no problems with his youth or his peculiar sense of humor, and although he had yet to make residency, he'd been *de-facto* captain of the Institute's 727 almost since joining us. As we'd had no pilots among us qualified to handle that plane since Flyboy's untimely demise, his appointment to the position freed us from the necessity of relying on a combination of Blue Blaze Irregulars unable to leave their current jobs permanently, hired talent, and commercial airlines. He'd even managed to find us a permanent co-pilot after only a few pointed words with one of his former employers.

When Buckaroo left him without specific orders, it was in the belief that Lindbergh had arrangements of his own to attend to. It was altogether possible that Xan's bravos would harry us all the way to Lambert, in which case it would be a very good idea to have the 727 in a position for a quick departure. If that could be set up at all with our communications apparently down, the pilot was the man for the job; some of the C-130 runs he'd accomplished for the Army were proof enough of that. He may have enjoyed getting reactions from his passengers almost as much as he liked the flying, but playing head games with the real opposition was a challenge he took more seriously.

Circumstances being what they were, however, Lindbergh's priorities didn't quite match up with Buckaroo's expectations. As the others dispersed to their various assignments, he turned back into the lounge in search of ideas. It seemed to him that the first item on the agenda was to get back in touch with the outside world in some way, and when he noticed the telephone sitting on the floor in one corner, he had to pick up the receiver and put it to his ear. The utter lack of dial tone that greeted him was no real surprise, but sometimes one has to go through the motions, and once he cradled the handset, he picked up the whole phone, then followed the cord to where it vanished into the wall. "I shoulda known," he said to himself when he saw that, although realistically it would make things easier than dealing with a modular jack since he was going to have to strip wires anyway. Typical of the Church's much stereotyped (and occasionally real) penny-pinching attitude where relatively durable goods were concerned, it was an old blackrotary phone, heavier than he'd remembered from his mis-spent childhood, and he wouldn't have been surprised to find out it was still there because it had always been leased, never purchased. He leaned over, put it down for a moment, and cut it loose from the wall without a second thought.

When he went out into the rain, he had the phone in one hand, cord wrapped around his wrist, and the Beretta ready in the other. Somewhere near the driveway he remembered seeing a junction box where the building's phone wiring met with a main cable. If he could find it and hotwire a connection without electrocuting himself, he could call the local police and get us some backup. He'd see about getting in touch with folks at the airport if his luck held long enough. Even without bravos to worry about, things were going to be tough enough.

Perfect Tommy arrived back at the bus at a dead run, slipping sideways between the opening doors with a dexterity that many a pro running back would have envied. This didn't prevent him from becoming soaked to the skin long before he reached his goal, but the water trail he left on his way to operations was a scant trickle of what it might have been if he'd been moving slowly enough to notice things like Lindbergh's own dash for the road. Someone threw a towel at him before he got that far, and he was rubbing down his hair by the time he reached the communications post. Mouse, a brightly red-haired intern some 3 weeks short of being able to test for residency, began her report before he could open his mouth to ask what they'd tried already. "We're being jammed on all frequencies," she began, unaware of exactly how much he already knew. "Very powerful equipment, probably no more than a couple blocks away, maybe as close as the bottom of the bus. Comm's down completely, and we're down to groping in the dark with the radar. If I had more people and the equipment, we'd be a lot closer to solving the problem, but right now, I don't even know what kind of hardware we're looking for. It could be masquerading as just about anything bigger than a lunchbox."

"So there's no way we can warn Reno and Wayback," said Tommy. "And we're blind."

"I haven't seen a pay phone around here, and even if we put all hands on a picket line, trouble would see us first. Short of that, I'm out of ideas."

"Everybody's headed back this way. That help the manpower issue?"

"Maybe," she allowed. "But what do I tell them? Look for anything out of place? Right, like us Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and heathens are supposed to know what a defunct Catholic school ought to look like." Mercifully, she stopped short of adding 'Not.'

"No possibility anyone could have planted something on the bus? I hope."

"Underneath, maybe; we'd probably have missed them coming the way it's been raining. About five minutes ago, you might not have gotten here yourself. Probably would have drowned waiting for T-Bear to open up." That was probably a bit of an exaggeration, but Tommy wasn't willing to put money on that, although it would not have been wholly out of character for the other man to leave him standing in the rain a few seconds longer than absolutely necessary.

"Mouse, I'm wounded," T-Bear called back to them, distress and disappointment in his voice. "I'd never do a thing like that."

"No, you'd drown him personal-like, right?"

"Absolutely." It would have been quite impossible to listen to that part of the conversation and assume he meant it; ever since T-Bear had taken over as official crew chief for the Jet Car, he and Perfect Tommy had worked together considerably, and sniped good-naturedly at each other whenever they weren't both up to the elbows in automotive equipment. When it came to cars, trucks, or busses, however, T-Bear was seriousness itself. "If I find out someone's been tampering with the bus," he said in a much different tone, "they're gonna wish they were history." However upset the idea had him, he had at least part of his mind on immediate business; he'd left his driver's seat long enough to retrieve his Smith & Wesson, and a stack of towels, while pestering Tommy.

He also found he'd returned to it just in time to open the door for the first group of interns Buckaroo had dispatched. A few of them were already armed, and had possessed the forethought to drape various lightweight plastic bags over their sidearms for the trip from building to bus. Towels and information were passed around with equal informality, and the first returnees had scarcely stopped dripping when New Jersey brought his group in. "Where's Lindbergh?" New Jersey asked immediately.

"I thought he was with one of you guys," said Perfect Tommy. "You don't suppose...?" The words had scarcely left his mouth when the distorted but recognizable crack of a single gunshot echoed from the general direction of the building.

Chapter Seven

Sergeant Harrison wasn't the kind of cop that could have been the inspiration for movies like Die Hard or Lethal Weapon, and the only thing he really had in common with Dirty Harry was his age. Still, he'd seen enough of those movies to know what the media was likely to try if he returned to the station house where they expected to find him. In the movies, this is usually the front door; in real life, that only happens with news conferences. Reporters may be predictable to a fault at times, but the good ones aren't stupid, and tend to know where the employees' entrance is as well as the cops who use it do. And like anyone seriously engaged in the business of law and disorder, reporters tend to recognize unmarked police cars when they see them. Even if they aren't sprouting an unconscionable number of antennae, they all come from the same manufacturer; at most, a department that actually provides unmarked units for its officers seldom has more than two models in operation at a time.

This being the case, Harrison returned to the station in a cab and walked through the front doors with a Wall Street Journal under one arm and a battered briefcase in the other hand, looking considerably more like an embattled public defender than a homicide detective. While this was sufficient to bypass the reporters at present, his fellow officers were another matter. The beat cops on the first floor were either preoccupied by their own immediate business or unaware as yet that he was in charge of the case, but by the time he got back to his own desk, he was almost grateful for the stack of paperwork waiting on it. That, at least, was a reasonable excuse for him to avoid dealing with people for awhile. In another half-hour, he'd be able to face his co-workers without letting the first question about his case get the better of him, but not right now.

He very narrowly avoided pushing the phone off the desk into the trash can when it rang before the chair had a chance to get warm. Instead, he only answered it with all the day's frustrations undisguised. "Harrison."

"I don't know what's got you taking this so personal, Matt," the voice said from the other end, "but you might want to see what I've got down here in the morgue."

Harrison took a deep breath. "Don't tell me this is the first I'm hearing about a body they dug out of there, Karl, 'cause I *don't* wanna hear it."

"Better than that. This is the DJ. Guy went ballistic in interrogation about an hour ago, blew right through the glass, down the hall and out the window. Figured he must've been doin' PCP, but now I don't know. You might want to be

here when the coroner goes in. Pictures turned up something that may be up your alley."

"You tell the Captain yet?" If the DJ was involved, and this news made that look much more likely, it would definitely get the press off his back for a day or two while they were busy castigating the deceased instead. Hell, even if the DJ wasn't involved, his taking a three-story header out the station window was enough to make the reporters think he'd been into something shady. Especially if the right spin got put on the 'leak'.

"If I'm blowin' this, I'd rather not embarrass myself that bad. *You* won't broadcast it all the way to New Jersey on me." Okay, so Harrison had no plans to let it get as far as the Garden State and they both knew it; he and Parks had been friends ever since the academy and knew each other better than a lot of other cops knew their partners. Parks wouldn't have mentioned New Jersey at all if he'd had a better way to suggest Team Banzai might find it of interest.

"How long do I have to get over there? Can I check with the lab first?" They all knew the green goo on the flechettes was talava, but he'd have to get it properly documented sooner or later. With a little more luck, Murphy'd know by now -- and be able to give him an update on other matters as well if she'd been able to stay in touch.

"Maybe half an hour. Much more stall than that, people'll notice."

"I'll be there." He hung up the phone without further formalities, pushed the paperwork into his top drawer where it would at least stay in the current sequence until he got back, and headed off to the lab. If the growls he acknowledged his fellow officers with were a little softer than before, no one let on.

Murphy wasn't the name the lady'd been born with, and not one Harrison would have admitted knowing her by in public in any case. If it suited her better than the one on her driver's license, what of it? Her knack for causing men -- particularly crooks -- problems at the worst possible moment was well known throughout the department, but written off largely to the fact that she had the misfortune of being drop-dead gorgeous as well as a genius with chemicals. She could no more help distracting young male officers than she could stop breathing, which meant that she spent as much of her working hours in a tiny lab as she could manage. Harrison had himself considered asking her out when they'd first met, but he'd dumped any thought of getting serious about her immediately when he'd discovered she wasn't in the restaurant by chance. Dating another cop was iffy enough in terms of office politics, doubly so in her case for other reasons.

So when he reached her door, Harrison rapped on it loudly and announced himself, then waited a beat before opening it. Murphy guarded her privacy for more reasons than the dangerous chemicals, though chances were good that he was the only one in the building at present who knew why. "Anything on the flechettes?" he asked first.

"Only what we both already knew," she said. "It's just official now. Which the boss already knows, near as I can tell." He didn't need to watch her pull the drape off the go-phone sitting on the counter to know she meant Buckaroo Banzai rather than his own Captain, not when the two of them accounted for the majority of active Blue Blaze Irregulars in the precinct. The display on it was dark, the audio scarcely a whisper even with the fabric out of the way; any louder and the

draped wouldn't have been enough to conceal it. Advertising those extracurricular activities wasn't advisable under normal circumstances and just now all it was likely to accomplish would be to get the most knowledgeable personnel thrown off the case immediately. As it was, it was likely he'd end up taking early retirement, or a desk job, as soon as possible after this one.

"I figured you might be in the loop. Anything you can tell me?"

"Big Norse figured we might be able to use an audio feed. This old thing can barely handle that much the way she's got it encrypted; we have *got* to get our hands on the Mk.2 even if we have to track down the gypsy talent ourselves to do it. Hell, if we have to go to work for them directly."

"I'll ask. Maybe if we shed a little light on this for people, we'll get moved up the list some."

"That's a happy thought," said Murphy, actually smiling a bit for the first time he knew of since things had begun. "There hasn't really been a lot of traffic, though. Reno and a guy named Wayback came out awhile before you got washed out, and I'm listening to them back-and-forth with Mouse now. Some kind of problem with their GPS, so she's verifying their navigation from World Watch One. The rest of it's mostly routine stuff; about all I know that may be related is that they didn't have a clue about the weather either, and that it looks like you've got an good case for attempted murder if we can ever track down which one of Xan's toadies started it."

"Replay's not dead?"

"I'm not clear on how or why, but evidently not. When she was still on comm herself, Big Norse told Reno that Replay wanted a sniffer dog check before she was staying in that hotel again. Aside from that, your guess is as good as mine."

"Well, that's something good, anyway. It's only a one way connection, though, right?"

"So I'm warned. I try to send back, I might be holding up a big 'look here' sign for the bravos."

"Well, if you get any opportunity, I'm headed to the morgue. The DJ wanted a flying lesson more than he wanted to answer questions."

"Figures. Watch your back, huh? I'm not exactly at liberty to do it for you."

Wayback was behind the wheel again and we were both listening to Mouse tell us about the next turnoff when the go-phone in my hand went dead. I gave it a moment on the off chance that we'd been cut off by accident, only to be dissuaded of that possibility by a series of electronic shrieks that would have made fingernails on a chalkboard sound pleasant. It didn't take an expert to realize those sounds meant trouble of some sort; the only questions either of us had were where and when it would hit.

Had we suspected that anyone else was listening in at the time, we might not have been as concerned about our own position as we were. There were only the two of us, after all, trying to find our way around an unfamiliar city and

coming up on one of the only three bridges across a river. The only better spot for an ambush in traffic would have been in the middle of a traffic jam where we wouldn't have had any maneuverability at all. With communications with World Watch One clearly out of the question, we were left with a limited number of choices: press on like nothing was happening, make a try for whatever cover we could find and hole up there until the situation was resolved, or presume that the safehouse was being targeted and hope we could generate enough surprise by returning to turn the tide of that battle. Presuming, of course, that we weren't intended to make a run back to the safehouse so that the bravos could use us as guides. If my own first instincts were to worry more about Buckaroo and the rest than about my own position, it was as much from habit as aught else and logic dictated that I consider all the possibilities.

Normally I might have expected Wayback to have an answer for me, but under the circumstances I wasn't sure I wanted to ask. Traffic was heavy enough given the weather that distracting him from the road wasn't especially wise. Since even Jet or Cameo would have needed a moment's concentration to assess the threat properly with all the variables that were involved, I could only presume the same was even truer of the Canadian intern, who might well be encountering this sort of thing for the very first time. He wouldn't knowingly drive into a situation without at least sharing that information, but he hadn't been with us long enough for me to be at all certain how much it would take to distract him from realizing he was about to do just that.

Being so distracted myself by debating what the right move was, I scarcely noticed that Wayback was angling for the first exit until he pulled the wheel back to the left sharply as another driver cut him off. "Deliberate bastard," he said, no more heat in it than if he'd been dictating a shopping list. "I think we've got a problem." He was clearly hoping he was wrong, but not especially expecting that to be the case.

I didn't bother to tell him to do what he could about it; that would have been redundant. Until and unless we were overtly attacked at fairly close range, there was nothing I could do about things but double check both my seat belt and my sidearm, and perhaps offer a suggestion or two. Neither one of us knew the town very well, which made his navigational choices as good as anyone's if he was trying to take things out of range of civilians, and no worse than mine would have been in any event. Rather belatedly, I resolved to consistently use the GPS as a backup system in the future, provided we got out of this alive.

Neither one of us actually expected the sudden disintegration of the windshield but we both understood its cause before we registered the impact of a single rifle slug in the upholstery. There was a sniper ahead of us, undoubtedly hidden in the superstructure of the fast-approaching bridge. We both flinched at the unexpected event, but to his credit, Wayback managed to correct his involuntary jerk of the wheel before our car sideswiped anything. For a moment I was more concerned about the civilians than anything else, then it occurred to me that the anticipated second bullet hadn't come at all. This bunch of bravos wasn't out for our blood; they were trying to herd us somewhere. That suggested we were targeted for a kidnapping, and I said as much.

"I presume we're already paying damages on the car," was all Wayback said about it before he swerved violently to the left, narrowly missing the front end of a second suspicious car as he deliberately pushed the gas pedal to the floor in spite of the risk of hydroplaning. "Act of war clause, or would it be terrorism?"

Murphy nearly knocked her microscope over in startlement when the go-phone abruptly emitted the same offensive sounds I have already mentioned. As with the rest of us who were hearing those noises, it took her only a few seconds to realize something was up, and several more to power down the go-phone. Being so far removed from the rest of us, her first instincts were that Wayback and I were at considerably greater risk; everyone else was in a better position to back each other at least briefly.

Even so, doing anything about it probably meant her career. Absolutely it meant she'd be pulled off the case immediately and that someone else would have to repeat the work she'd done so far if there was any hope of salvaging a case, but chances were high that the Captain would fire her on the spot for her outside affiliation; the number of times in the past two months that she'd personally heard him badmouthing Team Banzai as vigilantes and the Blue Blaze Irregulars as wannabes was already approaching his golf handicap. If she wanted to have any real hope of getting us any help, she'd have to admit what she was, and that would probably be that; the only real question there was how long it would take to get back to the Captain.

Altogether, she spent a full ten seconds debating with herself before she picked up the phone and dialed for an outside line. She'd heard enough before the jamming had started to be fairly certain she was calling the right department; there was only one route she knew that would fit Mouse's navigational instructions. Giving that set of instructions would have been pointless unless we were within a certain range of I-270, which left her with a fix that was at least as accurate as most motorists could give a tow driver. And since the chances were good that a show of force would be sufficient to keep any bravos from starting trouble, she wasn't particularly worried about not being able to describe the rental car.

It was possible that she was just overreacting by calling St. Charles and that the real trouble was brewing further west. It was also possible that her first call was already belated. Better to do everything she could to minimize the problems anyway; at least then she'd be able to sleep nights. It was always easier to apologize to a fellow cop for wasting their time than to the relatives of the victim for failing to prevent a tragedy. If she was going to blow her career as a cop in this man's town, then at least she was going to do it for the right reasons.

When you get right down to it, telephones are electrical devices. For the most part, people forget this, in spite of such terms as 'circuit' and 'wire' applying as much to phones as to, say, light fixtures. It's not hard to forget these things when the first thing most people do when the power goes off is reach for the phone to call the electric company.

Still, every year, thousands of meteorologists and weather readers remind people that they shouldn't use the phone during electrical storms unless necessary. And apart from phone company technicians, probably fewer than one person in ten really understands why. Perhaps it would help to explain the massive number of batteries that power the entire phone system and make comparisons to situations where batteries and water or other electricity simply don't mix; certainly most motorists are more cautious about hooking up jumper cables in dry weather than they are about telephones and storms.

Lindbergh studied the rain more than he did the junction box itself, taking a moment to determine the best way to angle the box's cover in order to minimize the amount of water that reached his working area. He was perhaps more aware than usual of the fact that this was realistically about as bright as using a blow dryer in the shower, but he couldn't see any other viable options. "Don't try this at home, kiddies," he said under his breath, and got down to the business of determining which line to tap into. For most people, this would have been a real guessing game without some way of testing for an active line, but he'd never quite decided if he was just an exceptional guesser or if he really could tell the difference between a complex circuit that was getting power and one that wasn't just by looking at them. He'd had friends try to tell him it was just pilot instinct, something that went along with being a natural as much as his ability to handle almost anything that flew, and which should have held true only with his planes -- but apart from the lack of a connection to an engine, how different could a junction box be from one of the small sections of wiring easily accessible in a large plane?

He wasn't expecting to get lucky with his second try, but it didn't surprise him either. He was rewarded with a dial tone at his ear when he touched the wires together, and quickly twisted them to firm up the connection in spite of the shock he got from it and the blisters that began to form on his fingers almost immediately. Dialing took considerably longer than his short prayer of thanks for the string of miracles which included the police, fire, and ambulance numbers being printed on a label pasted to the side of the phone. Certainly it was a good bit slower than he remembered push-button phones being on rotary-grade lines, although later he admitted he'd never really paid that much attention before. Then the wait for someone to pick up at the other end seemed interminable as well, although he realized it was probably only a matter of a few seconds. "O'Fallon Police Department, Sergeant Fuller. How can I help you?"

Chapter Eight

There are times when all the logic one can possibly bring to bear on events simply won't solve the problem at hand. If you're fortunate, this is merely a matter of crucial information not being available as quickly as you'd prefer. If you're very unfortunate, it's a matter of lacking the time to think at all. Indeed, the latter sort of incident is demonstrated on the highways of the world on a daily basis, too frequently in the form of fatal collisions.

I was all too aware of the possibility that we were about to end our careers with the Institute in exactly that manner as Wayback gunned the engine. Having ridden with Buckaroo for many years, I was not especially troubled for my own life, but it was quite impossible to be certain which of the other cars were being piloted by Xan's minions and which carried civilians. If we'd been convinced that there were only bravos on the road with us, I might have enjoyed the contest, but the chances of that were exceedingly slim. Any miscalculation from Wayback could too easily cost innocent lives as well as our own. Thus far, he'd been making the right moves, but they were close enough to textbook responses that they could easily have been taken into account already. One does not always surprise the other side by inverting the expected; there are times when tangential motion is far more effective.

Wayback, it seemed, was accomplishing this in more than one respect, although I didn't immediately realize it. Having been forced away from the last exit, he had no choice but to cross the bridge, something he was no longer inclined to do in a sedate or readily predictable manner. On wet pavement alone, the traffic we

were in would have made it an impressive bit of driving had he done no worse than sideswipe someone. With the windshield in pieces across the dash and seat, it should have been flat out impossible. He should have felt compelled to step on the brakes hard, or else try for nothing more complicated than straight line driving; instead he was making the chase cars work hard just to keep up.

It is perhaps a measure of my own state of shock that it took me several long seconds to notice what he was doing, and the better part of a minute to question it. By that point it was clear that he either knew what he was up to or was exceptionally talented at making it up as he went. Certainly this was something that went far beyond anything I could write off to pure luck, but the accomplishment was considerably more pertinent just then than his methodology. Even now, far removed from those perilous moments, I am not altogether certain that understanding would have eased my mind immediately about anything more than the breadth of his informal education. Those of us privileged to live and work at the Institute often become even more pragmatic in some respects than we were upon arriving there, and much more open-minded in others, but Wayback was ahead of the usual curve in that regard from the moment we'd first seen him. He'd spent just enough time on the streets as a youth to have discovered no source of knowledge regarding psionic abilities was to be discarded lightly, even sources which could best be described as third-hand.

Regular readers of these chronicles will know that I have described our first encounters with most of our gypsy residents to some degree of detail in previous volumes. While I have always been somewhat constrained in regard to issues touching upon their personal security, I have nonetheless made mention of several instances when each of them displayed abilities none of us had seen at close range before. Jet and Cameo in particular were almost evenly matched; although it had taken some while (and no little intervention from Raven) before any of the rest of us realized they were sisters, they'd trained with and against each other for more years than either wanted to admit. Raven herself was only scarcely a late-comer in that regard, and had competed or cooperated with either or both of them as circumstances demanded since her own childhood. All three had been known to pull the proverbial rabbit out when it really counted, sometimes at significant personal risk.

As the first of them to make residency, however, Jet bore the brunt of Wayback's personal disapproval. Cameo, and later Raven, had only been following a rather questionable precedent so far as he was concerned. None of this meant he was above studying whatever information he could get regarding any of their psionic abilities; the notion that they could accomplish anything telepathically or telekinetically that he couldn't learn to duplicate had simply never occurred to him. If one -- or all -- of them could navigate effectively in zero visibility conditions without hitting friendlies or missing targets, then it was clearly possible. He only needed to work out the proper approach. At present, it was really only an issue of locating other minds and maintaining enough distance from any and all of them to allow for the space a vehicle occupied. This was something much simpler than the kind of tactical plot our gypsies might use; separating bravos from civilians wasn't an absolute necessity when the former would make their own locations plain enough by behavior alone. Nor was it needful for Wayback to try to locate the inanimate steel of the bridge span when he could use the relative locations of other drivers as a indicator of his own lane positioning.

This was hardly something the bravos could have expected him to maintain for more than a few heartbeats, even presuming they'd allowed for his attempt to outrun them at all. The sniper was sufficiently taken aback that he missed a

hastily aimed second shot at our rear, apparently an attempt to stop us permanently there on the bridge, or at least to limit the distance we could travel to that allowed by whatever gasoline would remain in a punctured tank. The cars intended to box us in and force us over at a spot of their choosing were relegated to a flat-out chase role instead, something they certainly hadn't intended. Altogether it added up to something other drivers on the road reacted to rather differently than you see in the movies; while it's true most of them did their best to stay out of the immediate action and some even collided, Hollywood's idea of pursuits inevitably involves rather more spectacular degrees of damage and never seems to include so much as one civilian motorist bright enough to try using a car phone to call the local police.

Already alerted to the possibility that something might be going down along the interstate in their jurisdiction, the St. Charles Police had been in the process of getting a car on station just west of the bridge when we'd cleared that position. This made the incoming citizen call merit more attention than was normally the case for something in motion eastbound that close to the county line, and dispatch passed the information on to the marked unit headed that way. The officer behind the wheel immediately flipped on the lights and siren and put her foot on the gas pedal as hard as road conditions allowed; her partner changed frequencies on the radio and called ahead for the Bridgeton PD to intercept.

None of this affected Wayback's driving. I believe it entirely likely that he was unaware the authorities were being alerted; tracking where he was and what he was doing might not actually have required his full attention, but it was something he'd never consciously attempted before. It was also something he couldn't continue indefinitely even if his concentration never faltered. Sooner or later the bravos would start targeting the other vehicles as a deliberate tactic to force us to stop. Without knowing the area, finding any real cover was unlikely, which meant the best we could realistically hope to do was take this away from the innocent bystanders before someone else was killed. Doing so was going to make navigation much more difficult, and our chances of losing our pursuers, already slim, would nosedive, but there really wasn't much help for it.

We were curving down the first available exit ramp almost before I realized it. What little I could see of the signage indicated a large industrial park on the north of the interstate, and the visible terrain to the south seemed to lack buildings altogether. The light at the bottom was definitely red, a single car waiting for it to change, and Wayback pulled the wheel even further to the right to take the clear path to the south. The intent expression he'd worn on the bridge had softened considerably, as though lives of those on the highway were more than sufficient repayment for whatever fate had in store for him. It was a look I have seen come over more than one face in my time with the Institute, though never without mixed emotions of my own. On this occasion I could only wonder if studying "Replay" had taught him something about keeping the likes of Xan out of his own head; it is one thing to accept death without fear and quite another to understand that there are worse fates.

Aware that the eastbound span of the Blanchette Bridge was blocked by a multi-car pileup, a St. Louis County officer took the Earth City Expressway exit to make his routine turnaround instead of making the normal momentary out-of-jurisdiction swing through the edge of St. Charles just at the west end of the bridge complex. Everything to the north of the interstate along here was

Bridgeton's turf; they could just pick up anything in the two miles or so he was leaving uncovered today. It wasn't like it was going to hurt him in terms of stops or arrests anyway; chasing speeders was a questionable maneuver there to begin with, and with even a one-car accident on either span everyone wanted to gawk, not speed. Besides, in this weather, who wanted to pull people over just for speeding anyhow?

He'd just come to a stop at the bottom of the ramp when something flashed by to the south of the overpass. A second look through the now-diminishing rain confirmed that he had a possible target, a blue Camaro going southbound on the Expressway at much too high a speed for conditions. There was next to nothing south of the interstate to justify that; if it had been someone late for work, the moron should have stayed on I-70 for the next exit, then left I-270 at Dorsett to get there; it would have been a lot quicker. This meant that the driver was probably up to something more serious. The officer switched on his lights and sirens before putting his foot back on the gas, and was just starting southward himself when an unmarked white panel van followed the Chevy down the ramp going excessively fast as well, clearly trying to keep up with the sports car. "All units, all units," Dispatch said from the dash radio, "I have an APB for a blue 1987 Chevy Camaro, partial Missouri plates six two niner, and a green 1986 TransAm, partial Missouri plates whisky three eight, both wanted in connection with a 15-car accident on the I-70 bridge. Both vehicles may also be involved with the attempted murder of Team Banzai personnel. Subjects in the Camaro are two Asian males between the ages of 30 and 35, medium build and height; the TransAm is driven by a male caucasian, approximately 25, red hair, about 200 pounds. Subjects may be heavily armed."

He picked up the mike and identified himself. "I have a blue Camaro southbound on the Earth City Expressway, followed by a white panel van, both speeding. Request backup and ambulance." He wasn't sure what was up yet, but he was willing to bet that neither driver had a clue about the first bend in the road. Things were about to liven up considerably.

Wayback learned about the curve almost at the last minute himself when another car came around it toward us before we got there. But for that lone driver, and the fact that the Canadian hadn't quite given up tracking everything alive, we would undoubtedly have gone crosscountry. At one time this might have been intended to eventually become a 4-way intersection, but something had prevented that, leaving only a 90-degree turn in the middle of a field without anything to show why the street department had made it break left so abruptly. We only just made it around that curve on the pavement, going somewhat more than 10 mph in excess of the posted bad-weather speed limit. That was not fast enough to maintain the distance between ourselves and the first of the chase cars. It had trouble with the turn as well, not gaining as much ground on us as I would have expected, but gaining nonetheless. Something larger behind it which I couldn't see well enough to identify didn't make it at all, bounding over the shoulder to lose traction, if not more than that, in the field beyond.

We were just starting to hear sirens when a break in the rain let us see the stoplight at the next intersection. If anything, the turn that looked most likely to carry us away from bystanders was almost as sharp as the first one had been, and I braced for an impact with the signal standard that probably would have ended the chase, if not someone's life, had we hit it. Somehow, Wayback kept it under control, only to have to brake hard and swerve a few hundred yards later in order to avoid colliding with a police car arriving on the scene.

Belatedly we realized we hadn't taken the rain coming through the destroyed windshield into account when we'd estimated that the sirens had been much further away.

Behind us, the blue Camaro wasn't so lucky. With his self-confidence buoyed by success in the first turn, the driver had put on a bit more speed in order to catch us and thus missed the yield lane altogether, blowing through the intersection into a broad U-shaped loopback. Trying the southward turn again, he noticed the St. Louis cop too late to avoid that vehicle. The resulting collision took down the standard Wayback had so narrowly avoided, and every light in the sub-grid went out at once.

I put my pistol on the dash and my hands on my head to wait for officers to come over. If they were really the police, I didn't want to be mistaken for a threat. If not, then there was little I could do about it.

Pecos and Big Norse were the first to emerge from the relative cover of the door to dash for the bus, sidearms out and seeking targets they didn't encounter. Rawhide spent another moment under shelter from the weather, not commenting about Buckaroo's orders although it was clear he would have preferred to bring up the rear himself. Once he moved out with Dingo across his shoulder, however, he wasn't slow about it; even if Dingo was one of Xan's spies, that didn't make him, or anyone with him, any less of a target for whatever bravos might be about.

This left Buckaroo alone with Jet, something he would not ordinarily have felt any need to make excuses for. He didn't waste the time asking her if she was up to this; she wasn't, really, and they both knew it, but it had to be done and there was little use delaying. Still, she was probably the prime target. "Here," he said, stripping off his own jacket and handing it over. He could not help but think back briefly to a day some three years before when she'd forcibly loaned him her well-abused flight leather and wonder if she'd been any more certain she was doing the right thing than he was now.

From the way she looked at him when she took the black leather, he began to think she remembered the garment, or at least one enough like it to understand how this one was rigged. She slipped it on fast enough to suggest that warmth wasn't the highest consideration, and wasn't surprised at all when she put one hand in and immediately pulled a matte-black .22 autoloader out of the concealed hold-out holster built into that side of the jacket. The gun looked almost toylike in her hand compared to her usual choice of sidearms, but there was nothing playful about the way she checked the load before handing it to him. If the body armor had calmed her to the point she'd rather he be armed, so be it. He'd tried arguing with her about tactical issues almost three years ago and didn't expect to be any more successful now. "Ready?"

"More than I was," she said. To his relief, she sounded more confident in that than she'd been of anything but Dingo's condition since waking. "Go."

Aboard the bus, Rawhide was beginning to fret noticeably at the delay when Buckaroo burst from the recessed doorway to cross the parking lot as fast as he could move on the wet pavement. The explanation for that delay was immediately obvious, and Rawhide grabbed a second towel before meeting Buckaroo at the steps. "Anything else I should know about?"

Buckaroo didn't answer, but turned to look out the windows for himself just in time to see something he'd hoped to avoid. Jet was scarcely halfway across the pavement when the first bolt of lightning arced out of the sky directly toward her, attracted by all the metal in her body where a number of old injuries had been repaired. With dry footing, she might just have had the reflexes to avoid being hit; with her psionics intact, she would have been able to predict it enough to make some other, taller object the final target by altering her own path. Neither was to be this time. Something on the order of 1.21 gigawatts of electricity hit her in the center of the back, then split and arced away to either side of her as she lost her footing and went down, still conscious. Thunder overrode any other sound for some seconds while everyone's eardrums recovered.

Surprised by the near-hit to the bus, Perfect Tommy turned for a look of his own and saw Jet as clearly as the rain would allow anyone to see. The pavement itself was blackened to either side of her, and the leather across her back had been seared away to expose armor, but she was still moving somehow, doing the fastest infantry crawl he'd seen in his life and still on track for the doors of the bus. He lost that astonishing view just as Buckaroo and Rawhide started to recover enough from the flash to distinguish dark from light, and before he could find words to convey what he'd seen, T-Bear was opening the doors.

Chapter Nine

Lindbergh started badly enough that he almost dropped the phone. That one had been very close; he could smell the ozone, and just maybe something scorched as well. He decided against trying any further calls and yanked his makeshift splices loose so that he could close the junction box again; no use taking out any more of the system than absolutely necessary. He left the phone sitting on top of it to mark the spot for the repair crew, and headed back for the bus.

Partway there, he saw a figure on the ground, doing a variation on the classic infantry crawl which didn't seem to involve keeping a rifle out of the muck. Another few steps brought him close enough to realize it could only be Replay, or Jet, or whatever Buckaroo was calling her now; no sane person would have chosen to be out in this kind of weather in only a t-shirt even if they were upright rather than sprawled across the wet pavement. Concerned for her, he broke into a run, reaching her just at the bus. The doors opened before he expected them to, and he pushed her up the steps into T-Bear's ready hands before boarding himself.

Where everyone else was wet, she was positively soaked from head to toe, water gushing out the back of the damaged jacket the moment she started to stand. It was immediately clear she was none too steady on her feet, and T-Bear would have picked her up without a second thought and taken her at least as far as a seat if Buckaroo and Rawhide hadn't been at hand. As alert as she seemed not to be, she might even have cooperated with such a plan without comment. Certainly she made no effort to get her hands on the towels herself.

Buckaroo had more pressing concerns on his mind than the apparent miracle. There was plenty of time later to figure out exactly what had happened outside; his immediate priority was for Jet's present condition, which couldn't be good. Being a neurosurgeon, he'd seen the kind of aftereffects lightning could have on the human body, ranging from almost undetectable to severe. But while he had amassed a considerable amount of data on her physiology, this was the first lightning strike he could document as affecting any of her species, and the fact was that he had almost no clue what to expect. It was possible that she'd been

moving on instinct -- on autopilot, as she would undoubtedly have put it -- from the time she'd been hit and just hadn't returned to reality yet, in which case even she didn't know how badly she might be hurt. It was equally possible that she was instead going shocky on him already; with what she'd already been through in the last few days, such a lapse from her normal behavior wouldn't have been all that peculiar. The only certainties he had at this point were that she was visibly unmarked, apart from the ruined leather, and still self-mobile, if only marginally.

Rawhide was just as concerned, if blessedly rather less aware of how bad the worst case might be. He didn't say anything as he helped walk her toward the back of the bus. The look he gave Buckaroo was more telling in that regard than words might have been: how much more could she take? Buckaroo's immediate answer to that was equally silent; not so his second thought. "Dingo?"

"Not going anywhere," Rawhide answered. If he noticed he'd stepped on a piece of wire, pulling it free from its anchorage where one of the jacket's snaps belonged, he didn't make anything of it.

"He should keep for five or six hours, " New Jersey said, slipping in to take Rawhide's place. "Long enough for someone to tell me what's going on, I hope." He was more confused than usual, uncertain whether he'd missed something or whether things were just a bit weird. Repairs made to injuries she'd suffered long before meeting any of us were substantial enough for her to be a bit of a walking lightning rod; by rights, she ought to have rather extensive interface burns where flesh and metal came together, one of them made even more visible by scorched hair. Of course, he wasn't nearly as familiar with the details as Buckaroo was; it was possible there was insulation he simply didn't know about.

"That makes two of us," said Perfect Tommy. "No luck with Reno. Jamming's too heavy."

Buckaroo nodded, too distracted to notice whether Tommy caught it. The news made too much sense to surprise him any. "I think Dingo may be the only direct threat here," he said. "You guys get us rolling, and keep working on the comm situation."

Lindbergh interrupted at that point. "Half the cops in this end of the state should be on alert by now, Buckaroo," he reported. "I patched into the landline and asked the locals for reinforcements."

"Code two, please," Jet muttered, surprising them all. She sounded like a woman talking in her sleep, barely audible two feet away and scarcely aware of what was going on. "Damn sirens 're loud."

It was a good sign that she was able to get words out at all, even better that they were in English and clearly related to the subject at hand. Still, there was only one way to be certain whether she was pointing out a hazard for the officers, or discussing something she presently found offensive. "Are you all right?" Buckaroo asked her.

It might have sounded like a stupid question on the surface, but it was one of the few things he'd never known her to ignore. It seldom got a straight answer, but answer it invariably got; he'd long since learned to sort out the truth of the matter from even the most smart aleck responses. On this occasion, she made no real effort to be heard, which itself was an valuable indicator; she was about to be brutally honest with him because even the most marginal of

misdirections would have been too much effort. "Either keep it down, or shoot me now."

That wasn't good, but at least it was a complaint he had a reasonable chance of diagnosing and treating readily; if she confessed to being sound-sensitive it was because she had the sort of headache we wouldn't have wished on anyone, even Hanoi Xan himself. Under the circumstances, that could be caused by something as obvious as the shocks her eardrums had been forced to cope with, or it could be an early symptom of neurological damage. There were field tests that could help determine which was most likely, not as definitive as even a CT scan might have been and definitely less useful than if he'd been dealing with a fellow human, but with a few modifications they should still be good enough to pick up anything he'd need experienced help with. Best to begin as quickly as possible with them; the sooner he could treat even minor problems, the more likely she was to recover completely.

With someone else, he might have started with the usual questions -- who she was, what the date was, the color of an object in her line of sight. She hadn't been able to answer the first two correctly even before the sky fell on her, and the third was far too likely to draw no response at all. He needed a question she'd be sufficiently annoyed by to answer, preferably one he could phrase in a way that would force her reply to address the deeper issue. He settled upon one of her own expressions in its original language. "K'het ataahn?"

"Sheh'shalla," she answered, clearly unhappy he was bothering her with such trivia. It was enough to satisfy every resident in earshot that she was coherent enough to know what he'd asked her. "You got a better idea than I do." She stopped short of calling him something marginally rude more from a lack of the necessary ambition than from caution. 'Where away?' was a query that made no sense at all to her, and she'd said so; if he knew her memory was playing games, he shouldn't expect any answer more specific than what planet this was. If that.

It hadn't taken long for Bobby "Crusher" Garbanzo to figure out that things were further out of control than he'd thought when our rental car didn't reappear in his rear view mirror as he passed the Earth City Expressway's on-ramp to I-70. Maybe there was something going on in that god-forsaken wasteland after all, he decided; he couldn't imagine any other reason that we might have gotten off the interstate there when it was so obvious that the lunatic driving could have continued at it indefinitely. Unfortunately for him, it would have drawn entirely too much attention to try doing anything about his misjudgement immediately. He could still get off at I-270 and pick up St.Charles Rock Road to the other end of the Expressway and head south there, but then he'd be lucky if he caught up in time to watch the rest of the bag squad wrap things up. The only other option was to pick up 270 southward and cut over on Dorsett in an attempt to get ahead of us and close the only escape route he was aware of.

Crusher had more of a reputation for brawn than brains, but didn't consider himself anyone's fool. Things weren't falling apart on him due to anything he'd done wrong, though he'd had his doubts about this plan from the start. It had nothing to do with the way the two Malays had come in and pretty much acted like they were God's gift to crime; they were dangerous enough that he didn't want to cross them over anything as obvious as that. The root of the problem was that they'd been too full of themselves to give any serious attention to his boys when planning the operation. He'd never had to contend with that kind of problem before, of course, but he read all the Mafia wars books he could get his hands

on, and they all agreed that failing to know the countryside well was something that would get you killed.

So far, that hadn't happened, but they'd need to be insanely lucky to prevent it. Crusher didn't think that merely being bravos was going to help Deng Fat and his sub-lieutenant any in that department. Hanoi Xan's personal bodyguards and officers didn't get any more of a bonus there than the next guy, and it was already possible that the fiasco downtown had cut heavily into whatever luck they'd had when they'd arrived in the country. Which, come to think of it, could explain why this operation had been so quickly and so poorly planned. Deng Fat probably wanted an obvious patsy to blame things on so he could keep his own head where it belonged. Crusher and his boys made a convenient target for such a plan.

Crusher may have been a few beans short of a bag, but he wasn't stupid enough to cooperate with his own demise that easily. He couldn't dawdle or cut and run; either of those options would have resulted in a slow and painful end to his life of crime. His only choice was to get back into play as quickly as possible and hope he could turn things around.

By the time he was set up properly for the Dorsett exit, a set of flashing lights had appeared in his rear view mirror, and he realized there were indeed circumstances when he was actually glad to see the cops.

Murphy hadn't expected things to escalate so quickly when she'd placed her initial call to St. Charles. They should have been far enough east to have handled things themselves, she'd thought, but by now there were three separate jurisdictions involved with the chase alone. Sorting it all out was going to take days, not hours, which might well be the only thing standing between her and unemployment. She thought about going home sick, but knew that staying at the station house was her best way to track what was actually happening until and unless Big Norse and her crew managed to find a solution to the communications problem. Still, it was frustrating on several levels to be in the squad room listening to the radio traffic; she was stuck with no way at all to pass on any of what she was able to learn, and way too visible if the Captain should come looking.

She'd known signing up that becoming a Blue Blaze Irregular isn't for everybody. Along with the moral code one must inherently hold to in order to consider joining, there are the physical training outings, the mandated annual educational advancements, and being "on call" at all times to help out either Buckaroo or one's neighbors as necessary. In her case, the opportunity to attend selected symposia at the Institute and the newsletter subscription came closer to being liabilities than the rest of it, but that was a matter of one person's opinion being a serious problem for her. The number of US jurisdictions where the police consider Team Banzai to be vigilantes waiting for an opening may be counted on one hand at last poll; for the most part we are at worst looked upon as responsible citizens who attract a certain amount of trouble due solely to our notoriety as musicians. Still, trouble can come as readily from prejudice as from obvious attack.

When the Captain came into the squad room, she thought at first that she'd had it. To her surprise, however, he didn't want to know how long she'd been involved with any of us. "You wanna tell me why you've got an FBI visitor in your lab?"

"No idea," she said, as much startled as relieved by that news. "Wilson has the bomb fragments, so it can't be that."

"You get done with the fed, you let me know what it's about. Got that?"

"In one," she answered, letting him take it as he would and retreating for her lab before he could say anything more. She couldn't imagine what the FBI might want with her, unless there'd maybe been a series of talava incidents across several states that the department didn't know about yet. Even that didn't quite make sense, though; if it was that straightforward, the Captain should have been the first to know.

"So what have we got?" Harrison asked as he walked into the morgue.

Parks pointed to the skull x-rays still hanging from the lightbox on the wall. There was a sharp-edged geometric shape visible where neck and head came together, alien enough for even a first-year rookie who'd never seen an x-ray to have judged it abnormal from across the room. "Guy's wired. What for, we're not certain. Coroner's deputy went off to confer with some experts; hasn't come back yet."

"You tell him what you didn't quite tell me?"

Parks nodded. "I think that's what he's checking into. I'm guessing it's a transmitter, not a bomb. Well, not a bomb this guy knew about, anyway. If it was, why dive out the window when you could blow your own head off and take some cops with you?"

"Transmitter. Like Captain Happen."

"First thing that came to mind when I saw the pictures. God knows I hope I'm wrong and it's just some kind of civilian experiment, but it's too good a fit. Guy gets himself backed into a position where his only way out is to squeal; next thing you know, he's screaming and through the glass."

"Anybody got a handle on the next of kin yet?"

"Doesn't seem to be any to worry about. Just an ex-wife he dumped when she went nuts, and she'd probably cheer if she was stable enough to notice it happened; her people brought spousal abuse charges about 5 years back, but some hot-shot lawyer got him off on that and filed the divorce papers. Claimed she'd attacked him in a jealous rage and he'd only been defending himself."

"Real nice guy. Maybe we should look into where the lawyer's connections run."

Chapter Ten

The Hinge of Fate of All the Asias was understandably displeased. Even the Hong Kong Cavaliers, those detested minions of the hated Banzai, had believed Replay to be in far less than her normal fighting trim; while Hanoi Xan was prepared to believe it possible that Dingo had somehow outfoxed him, it was clear to him that she must have been the one who'd fired the fatal shot. It was not something Rawhide would have risked under those conditions, not with her so close; the chance of even a direct hit damaging more than the target would have been

considerable even in full light. That left only Replay; therefore, she was the shooter. She must either have been incredibly confident of her aim, or more than a little suicidal.

The fact remained that Dingo was no longer of any use to him. Reports from his other spies concurred that Replay was still considered to be convalescing and had not yet resumed her own personal equipment, which could only mean that she must have borrowed Rawhide's sidearm. Dingo hadn't heard any indication she'd warned the other man she was planning to take it, which could only mean that Banzai's second had been taken off-guard by more than the power failure alone. Her performance during her escape months earlier was sufficient evidence that she was capable of obtaining weapons on virtually no notice, using only the slightest of distractions to full advantage. Undoubtedly Rawhide's first reaction would have been indignation; even if she hadn't killed someone the cowboy would have considered an ally, the sudden loss of his weapon would have justified a certain degree of anger.

Eventually, Xan decided that the immediately troublesome question was neither how nor why Replay confounded his best attempts to predict her at every turn, but rather, why had she fired at all? Dingo had never been intended as a physical threat to her; his task had been to make sure that certain compulsions had taken hold and if the original implementation had not been effective, to place them anew. She should not have been able to tell he was even that much of a threat if the commands she'd been exposed to while unconscious in the hotel had taken hold, unless perhaps the unfamiliar sign and countersign had been some manner of tip-off. Rawhide would not have told Dingo to come ahead as well if he'd been certain what Replay was telling the man; was it possible that she shared history with more than a few of Team Banzai's ex-cops? Might she actually have expected him to reveal things she didn't want Rawhide knowing?

That thought calmed Xan considerably. He might have a very useful avenue of attack shaping up; faith and trust were after all such fragile things, so *very* vulnerable to doubts.

Jet leaned against the doorframe of Buckaroo's private quarters at the rear of the bus, taking the opportunity to focus as much as possible on assessing her own condition. The stairs had taken every bit of concentration she'd been able to muster, and if they hadn't been almost exactly as narrow and steep as the steps she was accustomed to find in military control towers, she knew she probably wouldn't have been able to climb them at all. The ache in her head was beginning to recede now that she wasn't hearing half a dozen things occurring around her simultaneously, but the better her head felt, the more she noticed other hurts. She was distantly aware that Rawhide and Buckaroo were not the only ones seriously concerned about her, and somewhat more alert to the questions Buckaroo had for her now than she'd initially been. Some of them made no sense taken individually, but she was beginning to see an overall pattern. Unless she was very much mistaken, it was diagnostic, the best set of substitutions he could come up with for the usual queries. It wasn't like she'd had that clear an idea of what was happening around her to begin with, but at least they'd had time to establish her level of confusion earlier; he'd be misreading some of her answers very badly otherwise.

She was also a little distracted with her own checks, which couldn't be helping him any, but she wasn't aware of anyone else in a position to be doing them for her. She wasn't all that steady on her feet yet, but that ought to pass; the

system gyros had overloaded and needed time to reset, time that circumstances hadn't really allowed. By rights she should have lost them again altogether, which would have been rather problematic even if her head had been straight to begin with; just now, it was a little difficult to override her skewed sense of balance on visual ranging alone. That ought to resolve itself given time as well; either her inner ear would recover quickly enough or her compensation for it would improve as her headache faded. None of it was worth worrying about yet as far as she could tell; whatever neurological damage she might be suffering from, it was talava-related this time.

That evaluation completed, she took a deep breath and recentered on the present just as Buckaroo finished cutting her free of the ruined leather jacket. The sodden garment slid off her shoulders at scarcely a touch, the additional weight of the water it had soaked up pulling it free, the sleeves turning inside out as it fell but not hanging up on her hands. The other man, a gangly fellow who seemed as much carried along by circumstance as simply rolling with things until there was time for explanations, caught himself looking at her soaked t-shirt and hastily averted his eyes. She didn't really need that very human gesture of concern for her modesty to remind her that her relations with everyone around her would have been very unstable even without the apparent machinations of Hanoi Xan.

Buckaroo was considerably less distracted by her attire. Most of the wearable clothing we had available just then had either been supplied by the same Blue Blazes who'd set up the safehouse or had been stored in this tiny cubicle to begin with; rather than feeling he needed to choose a random direction to look, he had a specific purpose in mind. There were things here that were a close enough fit for her to satisfy propriety, and she'd never concerned herself much over what any of the family's physicians might or might not get a look at. Having New Jersey in the room would satisfy Penny that nothing untoward was going on, and we could worry about legalities later if Missouri law specified the required chaperone be another female.

With the broad outlines of his own thoughts written even as faintly as that on his face, Jet was surprised to realize she understood him without words. She had a vague and distant memory of people at the ranch giving her grief about someone with shields sufficient to prevent her from reading his mind even with his cooperation, someone she'd had to resort to nothing more than verbals and visuals to be able to anticipate; was it possible that she was looking at that man *now*?

Like it or not, she couldn't afford the time to speculate on that for more than a moment or two at a time just yet. Things were happening much too fast for such luxuries as proper rest or testing her long-term recall. He'd said something about getting the bus underway which could only mean that the safehouse had ceased to be useful even as a staging point, and it was clear that people had understood more than he'd said, but it would have been nice to know that herself. "Two things," she said, her volume still subdued but sounding a great deal more like herself now that she was beginning to get her second wind.

He didn't discourage her, so she proceeded. "Where?"

It was a question he only understood because he'd grown accustomed to her sometimes peculiar sense of priorities and her habit of making one word do the work of three when she was feeling stressed. "We're not welcome in St. Louis right now," he answered; "but the police can find us in New Brunswick."

"Lindbergh flying?" Buckaroo only nodded. "He'll do," she said, not certain why she said it; usually she preferred to watch other pilots for a lot longer before she was willing to pronounce them competent. "What about Dingo? Don't wanna be airborne with *him*, the state he's in."

"We know what we're looking for," Buckaroo said. "It won't be an issue."

By the time the ambulance arrived on the scene south of Earth City, the officer who'd initially requested it had realized that one was either vastly insufficient or one too many. The white panel van lying overturned in someone's pasture now had rolled at least twice if the trail it had left through the grass was reliable indication; it was far enough from the pavement that the flashing lights only began to reflect back from it as the rain finally began to lighten up for real. By the time an officer had finally taken a good hard stare at my identification and allowed that I might in truth be who I claimed I was, it was clear that this one was going to be a long while in the figuring out.

Answering questions for the police is often time-consuming enough when you're dealing with officers who can easily drop by for a visit should they wish to discuss things further. Add to that the fact that we had two entirely different sets of officers seeking explanations, and I fully expected that Wayback and I would be tied up in someone's station house until the wee small hours of the next morning even before St. Charles got a chance to take our statements about events on the bridge approach. I only hoped that I had the opportunity to call the house and let people know we were safe, or talk to one of Big Norse's crew aboard World Watch One via go-phone if the jamming problem was ever resolved.

I was not prepared for my first real look at the scene to include a face I recognized from a copy of a single, grainy, black & white Interpol photo which presently hung pinned to a dartboard in the bunkhouse. Deng Fat had plainly been a passenger in the first chase car, for its driver was still slumped over the steering wheel. He'd either been shaken up badly by its collision with the cruiser or was communing with his foul master when I set eyes on him, for there seemed not to be a mark on him beyond the early signature of a seatbelt bruise across his exposed collarbone. Perhaps I can be forgiven for the slight hiss that crept into my voice as I identified him for the policeman still standing next to me. "Deng Fat. One of Hanoi Xan's lieutenants."

To this day, I have no doubt that he heard his own name as clearly as the officer did. The look he shot at me was alert and venomous enough to have dissuaded anyone less accustomed to dealing with the criminal element than a veteran officer, or a Cavalier. "You will not live long enough for it to matter," was his only audible response.

Wayback, meanwhile, had understood when the panel van went off the road that it hadn't been range which had taken them out of his limited 'sight', but it hadn't really occurred to him that its occupants were either dead or nearly so, along with some farmer's cow the vehicle had come to rest atop. As soon as the other officer had returned his i.d., the Canadian had turned to view the little he could see of that wreck, trying to make sense of it. When he turned around to stare at Deng instead, it was with that particular intensity we'd only seen him display when someone deliberately tried to prevent him from reading their mind in lab experiments. Deng only laughed and raised cuffed hands toward his ruined ear. I shouted a warning, certain he was up to something, but knowing I was

already far too late for the officer trying to put him in the back of an undamaged cruiser.

To their collective credit, most of the other officers on the scene dropped to the pavement at once. Wayback was there no more than a heartbeat later, taking cover behind as much of the car as he could; he, at least, had seen the aftermath of a bomb at close range and was aware of the existence of the Death Dwarves, but his reflexes weren't quite as developed as the patrolmens' were. Still, even we were surprised by the force of the explosion that rocked the remains of the panel van, sending shrapnel flying in every direction and shooting flames twenty feet into the air even before the secondary explosion from the gas tank.

Caught in the open with a firm grip on Deng when I'd given warning, one officer had stayed on his feet. Deng took advantage of the blast to break loose and charge toward us, using the few seconds of delay on the detonator in his own bomb to try to get close enough to make good his threat of a few moments earlier. He made it about halfway before someone realized that this was one shot more risky to ignore than to take.

It was Rawhide who first noticed Lindbergh was wounded. "Lemme look at that hand, " he said, making the pilot blink at a request not immediately understood. "What'd you burn it on?"

"Oh," said Lindbergh, finally connecting. "Got a little toasted connecting to the landline." He looked at his wounded digits for the first time and was mildly surprised to discover only the blisters of second degree burns where he'd half expected to see worse. "Hasn't really started to hurt yet."

"It will," said Rawhide. "Anybody tell you that's not smart?"

"Yeah. Me." He seriously considered the extent of the damage for a moment. "I'm still airworthy. Wouldn't want to have to deal with a chopper, though."

"That true, or just wishful thinking?" It was not a question he would have asked just anyone, even under the present circumstances, but Lindbergh had only been one of us for some four months. Once upon a year, this would have meant he wouldn't have made intern for at least another two months, but one of our post-Yoyodyne changes had been the accelerated internship program he had recently graduated from. Designed to take prior experience into account more fully than we'd been accustomed to doing in the past, the program allowed apprentices with one or more of the mandatory skills to advance to intern status in less time than those who had to be taught everything, but I digress. Suffice it to say that one of the few flaws we'd discovered with the accelerated program is that we didn't always have as much opportunity to learn how accurate our interns' personal judgment was on issues such as this.

"*Wouldn't*, not couldn't. Guess I'd better have someone tape these up, though." It was not in his nature to raise the issue of his co-pilot; either Silk was safer with the crew guarding the 727 than any of the rest of us, or she was in considerably more trouble than he could hope to deal with until we could verify her position.

The O'Fallon police might be another matter. Given a completely different segment of the available radio bandwidth by law, they might still have working

communications, which was something else Lindbergh had been thinking when he'd gone to so much effort to bring them in.

Chapter Eleven

Murphy wasn't thrilled with the idea of dealing with the FBI; our own occasional clashes with official Washington tend to make BBIs in general rather leery of federal involvements, something which she had to deal with on top of the usual police suspicions that the feds were going to muck up a case by trying to take it over. Even so, heading back to her lab seemed infinitely preferable to making herself easy for the captain to find a second time. She had a moment's thought about checking the gun in her holdout holster before she went in, but restrained herself. If a mock FBI agent was going to start shooting in a building full of cops, the opportunity she'd likely have of preventing anything was next to nil. If a real FBI agent saw a gun, that could set up a stand-off she didn't want to be involved with.

She was not surprised to find that the lab door was open. That meant the fed was probably poking his nose into all kinds of places she didn't particularly want him to; still, she'd tucked away enough samples of the evidence for safekeeping that the interference probably wouldn't do all that much damage to their case. Some of those samples were already on their way to Institute labs anyway; the Post Office wouldn't let go of them in transit without a warrant no one would know to get. "Most people wait until they're invited in," she said as she came through the doorway and noticed her assumption she'd be dealing with a man was inaccurate this once.

She staggered and nearly hurt herself on the edge of one counter as the agent turned around. Murphy recognized the other woman immediately and only the long months of practice she'd already had at concealing her Institute affiliations gave her enough control to avoid asking the first question that came to mind. Something had gone very, very wrong for this particular visitor to be anywhere within miles of her; the last time they'd been in the same room, Murphy had been handing her off to a pair of federal marshals for relocation with a new name and identity. People didn't just pop back out of the Witness Protection Program's woodwork. That was tantamount to suicide even if you knew exactly what you were doing.

"Allie Westin, FBI," said her visitor. It was not a name Murphy knew, but then, it shouldn't be. "Sorry to startle you like this, but we need to talk."

No kidding, Murphy thought to herself as she gave her own name. The other woman hadn't gone as far as having a facelift yet, so there wasn't a lot she could do beyond that to maintain the illusion that they'd never met. "So, what does the FBI want with me?" What she really wanted to know is why they were looking at each other now, scarcely six months later. From what she'd heard, getting two consecutive life sentences at Marion had curtailed a lot of Tyrone Anderson's more anti-social activities, but it hadn't prevented him from making calls which may have had much to do with other people ending up dead, people who'd been a lot less involved in the trial than Allie had been.

"I understand you've helped out the marshal service in the past. We have reason to believe you may have put yourself at more risk than you're aware of. It's not something I can discuss at length in an unsecured room."

Since Allie was the reason the marshals had come to Murphy to begin with, the chemist was rather inclined to believe there was more to it than was safe to

discuss there or anywhere else around the station house. It had to be something likely to complicate her life; if Tyrone Anderson was out of jail and looking for her, the news would have come through channels. And Allie had always known how to get in touch with her on a strictly unofficial basis if she really needed to; nine weeks of watching her had made sure of that. Certainly anything that didn't require a face-to-face would have been less risky for all involved by the time things were routed through the Institute's sensitive operations section. "I think you're going to have to convince the Captain," Murphy said, "or sit on me until I'm off duty."

"Under other circumstances, I wouldn't consider taking you away from the station for this, but there's reason to believe our man may know enough to walk in unnoticed," Allie said. "I can't say I think much of your chances down here if he can. Your standard little surprises could be old hat for this guy." FBI or not, Allie understood how Murphy thought after spending nine weeks in the same five-room apartment near SLU with her before and during the trial; chances were high that she'd already spotted at least a half dozen of the 'accidents' waiting to happen to an intruder.

"I don't guess I have much of a choice then, do I?" This was making things much more interesting than she would have liked, but then, that seemed to be nothing new these last 24 hours.

"Not really. Sorry." Allie pulled a two-way radio from her purse. It was already powered up, and she flicked the transmit switch to the VOX position. "Hammer, this is Reflex."

"Go ahead, Reflex," a male voice answered.

"You're go for phase two. I have contact; we are moving. Repeat, we are moving."

"Understood; see you at the store. Hammer out."

The radio vanished back into that bag, transmit switch pushed back to STANDBY so it would squawk if Hammer decided he needed to check in again. "My partner's having that little chat with your captain. I'd like to get moving before things get any dicier. If something does come down before we're clear, I'm driving a gray Probe; spare key's under the pennies in the ashtray. My partner's name is John Underwood; he can tell you everything if it comes to that." Allie was gathering up the more incriminating and personal things from the counter and drawers as she spoke; she handed the go-phone to Murphy immediately, but said nothing of it's existence. The rest was small enough to go in Murphy's purse and Allie's blazer pockets. "Ready?"

"I need to leave a message for Matt Harrison; if he comes looking for me again and I'm supposed to be here, he'll worry."

"Keep it short; don't tell him anything you can avoid."

"How about a family emergency came up and I'll get back to him when I can?"

"It'll do."

Murphy nodded and pulled a blank page from the lab book. She wished she had a way to get the same information to Team Banzai herself, but at present that wasn't to be; in theory she could call the Institute, but that was no guarantee that word would reach Big Norse and there wasn't really the time for it anyway.

Harrison, however, could be relied upon to tell the people who most needed to know. With this in mind, she jotted down a message that was unremarkable on its surface, most of her meaning between the lines where few but BBIs could read it. He'd still worry, of course; she didn't really have any family to justify using that excuse and neither did he, but they'd long ago worked out that key phrase between them as a crucial indicator. Little as she liked any of this, under the circumstances she felt obligated to use it now; it would not have been fair to give him any reason to think she was being coerced.

The O'Fallon police, it turned out, had weather-related troubles of their own by this point, but Lindbergh's call had been enough of a shock for the Chief of Police to mobilize his full contingent of auxiliaries. Two of those officers met us at the end of the old school's driveway, and as he'd made the initial call, they wanted to talk to the pilot first. Lindbergh stepped back into the rain still wearing his wet clothes, a surgical glove over his bandaged fingers to keep them dry. As he'd hoped, they admitted to having one routine working frequency unaffected by the jamming World Watch One was suffering.

The younger officer braved the weather long enough to come aboard the bus for a word with Buckaroo. By this point, Rawhide and Perfect Tommy had hauled the still unconscious Dingo upstairs and out of immediate sight; neither one of them had been especially happy at leaving him in Buckaroo's quarters with Jet there, but there simply wasn't anywhere else to put him that the police weren't likely to ask about. Jet accepted it with better grace than they'd expected, considering that she'd so clearly thought him a threat earlier; perhaps she deemed it safest to stay quiet on the assumption that officers were about.

The fact remains that Buckaroo spoke to the officer in the operations bay, in easy earshot of a half dozen or more witnesses who in truth gave the conversation scant attention. It was brief and very much to the point, Buckaroo laying out a marginally edited version of events to date which omitted only Jet's identity and the incident with Dingo. The officer promised to arrange escorts as far as the county line, and to check with his dispatcher for any news which might relate to Wayback and me.

The bus pulled out with one police car ahead of it and another behind. By the time it reached the O'Fallon/St.Peters line, however, the lead car was signalling T-Bear to pull over to the shoulder where three state vehicles were waiting with lightbars flashing. A plainclothes Highway Patrol officer in a plastic raincoat leapt out of one of those cars to come aboard the bus with a hand-held police-band radio already tuned to the frequency O'Fallon had been using, and T-Bear got underway again in a matter of moments, now with the Highway Patrol running escort. Once the purpose of that brief but nerve wracking stop became evident, no one regretted it. It was not the same as having main communications back, of course, but it was possible to communicate directly with the escort officers without resorting to trucker's headlight codes old enough to predate Citizen's Band radio.

Ultimately, it was by means of this improvised system that word of the incident in Earth City reached World Watch One. Initial details were scantier than people would have preferred, of course; Wayback and I were alive, but being taken to a nearby hospital. Buckaroo immediately requested clarification, which was some minutes in coming, but word that both of us had nothing worse than scrapes and bruises was universally greeted by a cheer. "T-Bear," said Buckaroo, "we're going to De Paul. Lindbergh, you were local; navigate."

"Excuse me, Dr. Banzai, but I may be a bit more current," said the Highway Patrol officer. "I believe the I-70 bridges are closed. Could be related to your people; word is that someone was shooting at traffic from the superstructure."

"Lovely," said T-Bear, not quite managing to keep it to himself. "So where do I need to get off?" he said a bit louder.

"First Capitol," said the patrolman. "Left at the top of the ramp. You'll only have a couple inches vertical clearance when we hit the 115 bridge, so you'll want to take it easy, but I can have traffic held so you'll get both lanes to yourself."

"Delightful."

"I hate two lane bridges myself," the patrolman admitted. "But it's that or swing south to cross on Highway 40, probably 20 miles or more out of the way."

"Keep checking," said Buckaroo. "If the interstate reopens, use it."

"You're the boss," said T-Bear. He hadn't been thrilled by the necessity of crossing a bridge he was already familiar with, but hadn't seen any way around it; the concept of using a much narrower bridge with almost no maneuvering room in any direction rated fairly high on his list of things not to do even when he didn't have other worries. He doubted he'd be any happier with it even if driving the bus was his main job. By the tone of his voice, Buckaroo didn't like it much either, but couldn't see any better ideas.

Upstairs, Jet was focused on as much of the goings on as she could hear without showing herself. She was a bit concerned that the patrolman would decide there was something worth investigating aboard the bus. Her experience in such matters told her that there wasn't a decent cop in the country who'd be content to leave the issue of Dingo alone, and precious few of them were apt to keep their findings to themselves even if they owed Buckaroo major favors. Thus far, the biggest legal issue was the fact that she'd have to answer for discharging a firearm in the city limits; she wasn't worried about it except for an almost painful awareness of the amount of time straightening it out would take, time she was firmly convinced she didn't have at present.

She suspected both Buckaroo and Rawhide would have agreed with her on that, but didn't bother speculating on anyone else's opinion. From the way even the patrolman deferred to Buckaroo, it was clear she'd been right to judge him the man in charge. If the authorities perceived him in that role, it was all too likely that the same would hold true for the public at large, something she would definitely want to keep in mind. It was only one small additional piece of the puzzle, but one she understood was a good bit more critical than it might appear. He was much more of a public figure than she'd initially expected, even given the logo splashed along the sides of the bus; the fact that any cop would behave the way this one was acting around Buckaroo was enough to tell her he was more than just a musician and physician. He had serious pull somewhere, that much was certain. How much of that pull she could borrow was up for grabs; how much of it she *should* borrow was another matter.

She would have liked the time and opportunity to ask a few more careful questions, but wasn't convinced she could risk it even if Dingo hadn't been so close at hand. New Jersey struck her as competent but was otherwise largely an unknown quantity. Another time and she might have been more willing to go with

Buckaroo's judgment that he could be trusted with more than her medical records; just now she could live with Buckaroo and Rawhide knowing she wasn't operating at speed, but she wasn't thrilled with the notion of anyone else finding out. There had to be a reason she couldn't retrieve anything about people; until she knew what that reason was, caution would have to be the word of the day.

Evidently T-Bear was of the same opinion regarding the narrow bridge, for the bus stopped briefly before turning left and proceeding at a vastly reduced speed. She could feel the bridge decking vibrate slightly as the bus started onto the span, then there was a peculiar scraping noise overhead and a fractional speed drop that would have taken a professional driver -- or a combat pilot/musician -- to notice. She was not at all surprised when the noise stopped a moment later, not from anything T-Bear did behind the wheel. There hadn't been sufficient clearance for something, which had sheared away under the stress. Since Buckaroo didn't strike her as absentminded about such things, she was ready to presume that neither he nor T-Bear had known there was a legitimate clearance problem. That would mean something had been there which didn't belong. Something which ought to be laying on the pavement about now.

"Stop the tail car," Jet called down the stairs, issues of her own security momentarily forgotten. "We want that."

T-Bear was already putting on the brakes. He wanted to know what was going on and whether he was going to be able to get the bus off the bridge again in either direction before he went any further. There should have been enough clearance, unless the sign he'd seen was dead wrong -- or they'd finally discovered the source of the jamming. If that was the case, the perpetrator had better hope that Buckaroo got to him first.

Chapter Twelve

A bit of backtracking is perhaps in order to put things in proper context. Silk had been just a little surprised when Buckaroo put her in charge of a crew of three security interns and left her at Lambert International to keep an eye on the 727. She hadn't been an intern even as long as Lindbergh and wasn't really all that accustomed to directing anyone but flight crew yet, just very aware (mistakenly, I might add) that one error might be all it took to get her demoted back to apprentice. Rather than just sitting around aboard the plane for what should have been a few hours before they were relieved, she'd put her small team to work looking for potential problems and categorizing them. When they'd learned about the explosion at the hotel, they'd all realized that their brief shift had become considerably more permanent. Since then, she'd gotten rather more serious about things, and the result was that the VIP aircraft parking hadn't been so secure since the last time President Widmark and Vice President Simmons had arrived a mere hour apart for a joint appearance at the McDonnell-Douglas facilities on the far side of the tarmac. The airport police might even have learned a thing or two watching that happen; to her mind, it was best to be on the good side of the authorities whenever possible, especially when there was the remotest chance they'd be looking at you sidelong and wondering whether you were legal otherwise. Chasing them off like the Secret Service habitually did hadn't seemed to be a good way to win friends and influence people, so she'd let them hang around; they weren't any more likely to get past the current precautions without alerting people than she was, unless Kilroy had been exaggerating considerably.

There comes a point, however, when all possible precautions have been put in place and nothing remains to do but aircraft maintenance, at which juncture the

law enforcement personnel had lost interest. Uncertain how long we'd be on the ground, Silk hadn't been willing to start anything which couldn't be finished up in mid-air if necessary, but there had been enough 'comfort adjustments' to keep people busy for a few more hours, things like lubricating a recalcitrant seat in the passenger compartment and routine maintenance on the toilets, which had not been intended for use on the ground. Silk was convinced that no one, least of all Buckaroo, would chew her out if she'd decided to decamp as far as the VIP lounge, but with the rest of us holed up in a safehouse, she hadn't been comfortable with allowing even that slight increase in the opportunity for the plane to be sabotaged. She might have given up a lot of the habits she'd developed in her old neighborhood, but leaving transportation unwatched wasn't one she thought she'd ever shake even if she'd wanted to try.

The first solid indication she had of any immediate problem had come when a routine attempt at checking in had drawn more storm static than voice signal. For any pilot, this would have been worrisome; modern aircraft were designed to stay in the air after a direct hit, but that much lightning was frequently accompanied by winds that presented a greater danger. It was an occupational hazard, and one that would pass, but Silk would have been much happier if this particular weather had waited until things on the ground had been more stable. She'd flown out of Lambert enough times to understand the usual local storm tracks; anything affecting O'Fallon, Missouri, that much was likely to track in right down I-70; the only real question was whether this one might veer northward at I-270 as many storms did.

That answer came before she had a chance to consult with the control tower. The first wave hit hard enough to make itself audible against the skin of the airplane, but after listening to it for some minutes, Silk realized that the lightning she'd been hearing over the go-phone simply wasn't tracking with the rest of the storm. She wasn't enough of a meteorologist to be willing to say that was impossible, but she'd never heard of it in all the years she'd been flying. It bore checking into, probably at more length than she'd have time for. "I need some other hands here," she called back from the cockpit.

Kilroy walked in almost before she'd turned back to the radar screen to bring it online. "What's up?" This once, he wasn't wearing his trademark Oakleys.

"Some very strange weather," Silk said. "People are going to want to see anything we can record of it."

"Looks like a thunderstorm to me," said Kilroy; "Maybe I'd better check closer."

Startled, the Highway Patrol officer in the rear cruiser stepped on the brakes as hard as he dared, fully expecting to miss the bus but not at all certain he could avoid the air-conditioning unit that had just fallen to the wet pavement in front of him. "Idiots," he muttered, just a little annoyed that he'd have to deal with it. At least three people were at fault on this one; the bus driver ought to know his vehicle's height better than that, and both of his fellow officers had been in a position to have prevented the accident.

He managed to stop less than an inch short of the debris, amazed to have accomplished it here. The 115 bridge wasn't high on anyone's list of best river crossings unless you were talking to an artist or a lunatic, although it had never been as bad as the Tacoma Narrows Bridge; the span had been designed in the days of horse-drawn carriages and if it had ever been widened, the officer

wasn't certain of it. It was still narrow enough that two tractor-trailers risked kissing mirrors if they met, with curves on both ends and a significant downslope on the St. Louis side, the pavement in need of resurfacing to such a degree that the rebar which should have been buried in the concrete actually showed in patches. Wet as it was, he'd expected to need another dozen feet to come to a halt.

Exactly how much damage the bridge had sustained from the collision remained for the experts to ascertain, but at first blush it appeared the tour bus was the big loser. There was a distinct scrape visible on the superstructure which continued as far upward as the middle of the "Low Clearance" sign, but apart from the missing paint, nothing would have disturbed the civilians waiting to use it. With I-70 already shut down, orders were likely to come down not to close it completely without further sign of damage, but certainly this was going to keep it restricted to one-way traffic for the rest of the day, perhaps more. The only good thing about it was that he wasn't going to have to write the accident report in the rain.

Only a moment or two after she'd spoken, Jet realized she'd given herself away to the Highway Patrol officer riding shotgun. "Shoot me if I start doing that on a regular basis," she told New Jersey, clearly annoyed at herself again. He didn't take her too seriously, although he had to think for a second to realize why she'd said it.

"You'd better go on down," he said. "I've got this. Pecos found him unconscious, if it comes to that." Once upon a time, he would've been appalled if any other physician had suggested something of that nature, but that had been before he'd joined the Institute and discovered for himself that there were times when it was best to say little and let the other guy assume as much as possible. As far as it went, it was the truth; it simply wasn't the fullest possible version of events.

Jet clearly appreciated it, relaxing enough to telegraph that much through body language alone. "Don't turn your back on him," she said; "I can't swear he'll stay under. Do what you need to."

"Worry about yourself, okay?" He wasn't taking her warning lightly, although he answered it with that pretense; it was unlikely that anyone had found the time to warn her that the residents at hand all knew as much about the state of her memory as Buckaroo did, and now didn't seem the time to startle her with anything that might lead her to guess it for herself. Best to leave it to Buckaroo himself to tell her once she felt secure; she wouldn't like finding out they'd kept her in the dark, but that was going to be a lot easier for her to take than if the locals were to find out by chance. "Careful on the stairs."

She nodded acquiescence to that, a little surprised that it didn't set her head pounding again, and turned for the doorway only to see the sodden leather jacket lying where it had fallen on the floor. It stopped her in her tracks as effectively as though it had been stretched across the width of the room at chest height. For a long moment, she simply stood there like the proverbial deer in the headlights, eyes locked on the destroyed body armor. Then she shuddered involuntarily but managed to stay on her feet, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to settle her nerves somewhat. New Jersey wasn't certain he wanted to know what she was thinking, but he'd seen too many of Indigo's flashbacks in progress not to recognize the condition when he saw it elsewhere. Something

about the waterlogged cowhide troubled her; he could only hope it was nothing more than a reminder of the day's events. If it signified her unknown past coming back to haunt us, it just might be more than we were prepared for.

Still, she shook it off a lot faster than the ex-cop would have and went down to join Buckaroo. Someone below let loose with what sounded like a victory cry while she was still descending, telling her she'd been correct about the object on the roof not belonging there. This set off a flurry of activity she wanted to see before speculating upon, then Perfect Tommy's voice drifted back, audible amidst the morass of renewed activity largely because she recognized it. "This stuff wouldn't happen if your baby sister was driving."

"You remember that detail job you wanted me to do on your ride?" another voice responded immediately; "I got *just* the tool right here." The familiar rumble of the engine ceased, and it was not hard for Jet to imagine the bearded man behind the wheel holding up the key for Tommy's edification. She decided she liked the guy at once.

Closer at hand, a tall, well-built blonde confirmed the message already carried by the earlier whoop. "T-Bear definitely found it," Big Norse said. "I'm trying Reno's go-phone now."

T-Bear took the statement completely in stride. "Of course. What'd you think I get the big bucks for? Unlike some Mr. Know-It-Alls around here." There was no real hostility in it, merely an utter lack of celebrity-worship suggestive of long acquaintance.

It would have been completely out of character for Jet, or Replay, to leave an opening like that untouched. "Then I must have an even bigger salary," she said. "Or has anyone else noticed you pulled the plug on the storm too?"

After Deng Fat's little surprise, any thought of jurisdictional battles the police might have been harboring went by the wayside. Things were clearly too dangerous, and too wet, for that argument to take place at the side of the road. There was an officer down as well, alive but critically wounded; if he'd managed to maintain his grip on Deng in the wake of the first explosion, he would have been dead. The county officer who'd called for the ambulance before things got out of hand was now very glad he'd made the request. Other officers agreed that the hospital was a much safer locale in which to start getting to the bottom of things; after all, who was likely to move the damaged vehicles in the meantime, and there wasn't much a fire truck could do for the panel van that the rain wasn't already attending to.

The injured officer had been whisked off to a treatment room with commendable speed almost the second the ambulance pulled to a stop. Some ten minutes had elapsed and Wayback and I were sitting in the waiting area outside the emergency room with officers from two different jurisdictions asking us questions when I heard a sound I'd been hoping to hear since before we'd crossed the I-70 bridge. "Excuse me a moment, gentlemen," I said before answering my go-phone. Big Norse's happy face filled the screen for a moment before she turned to pass along the news that we had a viable connection.

"It's complicated, Reno," she told me while Buckaroo was making his way over. "We'll have to get you up to speed later." Jet's comment to T-Bear was faintly audible in the background, though at the time I didn't really grasp the

implications, but registered it more as a confirmation that things had required her to become at least semi-functional, wise or not.

"How bad is it?" I asked Big Norse anyway, certain I wasn't going to like the answer.

Buckaroo answered it, coming into view a moment after he started to speak. I wasn't surprised to learn I had an audience; everyone on the bus was legitimately interested after all. "We're headed your way," he said. "Took a little while for your twenty to filter down, and the bridge is a little tied up."

"No doubt," I said, thinking he referred to the three-lane span on I-70. "It was hot for awhile, but we're fine now. I wish I could say the same for all the cops."

"That one too," said Buckaroo, confusing me a bit; it was only later after I learned where the bus had been at that juncture that his comment made sense. "We've picked up an escort, courtesy of the state patrol, but someone's tampered with the bus. T-Bear just tore the jammer off the roof."

I didn't bother to ask whether anyone was retrieving that bit of equipment; if we weren't, it was because it was already in the Missouri River. "With a thirty-foot pole, I hope."

He shook his head but didn't elaborate, instead calling toward the front of the bus. "What's the ETA?"

"Fifteen, if the patrol cooperates," Rawhide answered. "Twice that at worst; Mouse is helping with the pictures."

"I heard," I said. "We'll keep our eyes open." I didn't tell Buckaroo how to find us in the building; if he knew we were at DePaul, he shouldn't have any trouble with the rest of the details. Asking where the cops were would have garnered sufficient directions, presuming he needed any.

Only the crowded conditions aboard the bus had prevented the Highway Patrol officer from investigating the new voice immediately, and by the time he managed to work his way halfway to the stairs, Jet stepped into view. The patrolman recognized her immediately from the photo which had run in the local media courtesy of Mrs. Johnson, and admitted to himself just as quickly that she was not what he'd expected. The black and white photo had been cropped from a larger candid shot taken shortly after the incident at La Guardia; she looked older and wearier now, the sense of humor apparent in the picture long gone. The clothes she wore obviously belonged to someone else, and the trousers were probably Buckaroo's; she was thinner at the waist but close enough to the doctor's height that the hems fell at her bare ankles without alterations. Likewise, her borrowed shirt was only a little wide in the shoulders, the sleeves turned up to keep them out of her way. Her hair was only beginning to dry out and needed to be combed; he wasn't certain whether it was dyed several colors or merely picking up odd hues from the available light. For someone who'd caught the brunt of a flechette bomb at close range, she looked remarkably fit, her wounds scabbed over but no longer bandaged, her half-hooded eyes mute testimony to the fact that she'd rather be sleeping.

He got his second surprise when she proved that she still had a sense of humor by joining the conversation T-Bear and Perfect Tommy had going, claiming she deserved a larger salary than either of them. She was much more aware of her surroundings than he'd expected given the way she looked, or perhaps she was doing her best to keep up appearances lest Buckaroo break away from his go-phone conversation to express concern about her. The scant information in the dossier the Patrol had on this intern hinted strongly that Replay was very much the self-reliant type, usually able to look out for herself if the reports from La Guardia were accurate.

When she followed up her financial concerns by commenting on the weather, the patrolman initially thought she was still teasing T-Bear. Rawhide took her much more seriously than that. "You're sure?" he asked.

"High probability. Lightning doesn't track like that, last I knew. Even if it did, why else would it stop so suddenly?"

Rawhide considered it for a moment. "EMP could've been the source of the jamming," he said, aware she was probably debating the same thing but keeping it to herself. "You up to checking for wires?"

She wasn't completely certain whether he was out of his league or just trying a plausible story out on the officer; if the lightning's electromagnetic pulses had been strong enough to jam anything, the bus engine would never have started to begin with. "Shouldn't need to," she answered, sticking to the immediate question. Buckaroo chose that moment to ask for an update, which Rawhide gave him; she didn't let the interruption disturb her train of thought. "Something like that would've needed its own power source, or it wouldn't've stayed hidden. No bigger than it sounded, I'd guess there wouldn't be a lot of room for airflow, much less enough explosives to suit Xan. My best is that if it's booby-trapped, it'll be acid; anything else unstable and we'd know it by now."

"Acid?" the patrolman asked, barely managing to keep his tone professional. "I don't like the sound of that." Considering the age of the bridge, his concern was well justified.

"It wouldn't need to be that strong, just water-resistant or liquid-activated," 'Replay' speculated. "By the time we get it somewhere we can neutralize it, even battery acid'd do plenty of damage, and keep people's fingers out while it did it. There may not be much left to find of the critical bits."

"I doubt we'll find fingerprints," Buckaroo said. His tone indicated he didn't expect to get anything useful at all but as long as there was even the slightest chance we could learn something from the device, it would have to be checked out thoroughly. "Can we presume this falls under Highway Patrol jurisdiction?"

"It all might," said the patrolman; "I can't make promises, but it all looks related to me. If it was all St. Louis county, it might stop with the Major Crimes Unit; with St. Charles county involved, the Attorney General might give all of it to us. Unless the governor calls up the FBI."

Even though she'd planned it herself, taken every variable she could think of into account, Allie was a little surprised that they got out of the building and to her car without incident. Maybe her partner was better at sweet-talking local cops than she'd thought, or maybe he was just taking as much of the captain's

time as possible; speculating about it while they were still on the premises was counterproductive and could be kept on hold until she'd put at least a dozen blocks behind them. She glanced down at her keyring itself for a moment before putting the key in the lock, checking the center of the 'o' in 'Ford' out of habit; if it had been any color but its routine white, she'd have known that someone had been tampering with the vehicle. Out here, that would have meant there were definitely at least two cops she needed to watch.

The lock opened smoothly, and she tripped the power switch for the other side to let Murphy in. "I know a great place down on the Landing," she said; "you've *got* to see the waiters."

If they hadn't done the same routine the first day they'd met, Murphy might have been pulled in by the line. Instead, she just played along, knowing that Laclede's Landing was the last place they'd be going today. "Mm; sounds tasty." Allie was firing up the engine as she shut her door, and the car pulled out of the lot only a few seconds later. When they were several blocks away, she got serious. "Why you?"

"I stumbled onto something I thought you'd want to know," Allie said. "One of your bomb squad guys turned up at a seminar I did in KC awhile back, so he called up to ask my advice on this one. That's when I heard your captain has an attitude."

"Yeah; he doesn't like some of us. He just isn't sure who."

"He will be, about as soon as he figures out you're the one who tipped St. Charles. I can't prove anything in court yet, but the man's connected to the World Crime League. I figure he's in up to his eyebrows."

Chapter Thirteen

Taken more than a little by surprise, Murphy sat there without a word for several seconds. It would make sense, she realized; she'd never heard anyone else quite so vehement on the issue of the Hong Kong Cavaliers who wasn't just a run-of-the-mill fundamentalist rock-and-roll hater of whatever religion, and for the most part the worst they had to say about the band concerned their music rather than their demonstrated morals. To be sure, the Institute and anyone connected with it could expect to take some flack from time to time in the media, but she'd been on the force for almost 10 years and the captain was the first cop she'd dealt with who disliked and distrusted everyone from Buckaroo Banzai himself down to the least experienced junior Blue Blaze Irregular. That didn't automatically make him a World Crime League member, anymore than refusing to pay income taxes made someone a traitor to the government, but this was Allie talking; for the moment, Murphy would trust that she was probably right.

"Thanks," she said finally. "I was about to lose my job anyway; if you're right, I'd be lucky to get off that easy."

"And if I'm wrong, you'd be out a job anyway?" Allie turned the wheel and went up the ramp to get onto the interstate. "Sounds like the story of our lives, doesn't it?"

"A little. Are you really with the FBI now?"

"Last job I had -- the one Tyrone gave me -- was demolition work. He started out doing effects for movies in three or four states but got a little greedy and

started doing side jobs for whoever'd pay. I used to be pretty good at blowing things up, but I like taking bombs apart better. The guy assigned to make sure I got to Ohio had enemies, and between one thing and another, I ended up with a new name and an FBI job teaching people how to disarm explosives. Every now and then, I spend some time out in L.A. blowing models with ILM or wherever taking a building down with CDI just to stay up on things. I usually stay out of the old neighborhoods, though."

"If anybody connects us with your old i.d., you may just have lost your job too," said Murphy; "among other things." Even with the FBI in the picture, demolitions was probably the last thing Allie should have been doing; some of the people she used to work with were bound to connect the dots eventually and any one of them might still be connected to Anderson.

"I think I'll survive it if I haven't just gotten Hanoi Xan's attention. I don't suppose there'd be an opening for an ex-FBI agent at the Institute..."

"Take a look at this," said Kilroy, not bothering to check how large an audience he had. The screen in front of him had the lion's share of his attention.

Silk leaned in for a decent view and recognized the standard NOAA lightning tracker display. Kilroy had it zoomed in a lot closer than normal, so that small white crosses would have marked the site of every hit if there had been room for them all; instead, there were a few individual crosses here and there along either side of an almost solid band of white that spanned the screen from left to right. The names of towns were just resolving in red as the monitor redrew the image; Kilroy had been forced to color-shift them to make them visible at all.

Judging from those few markings, the vast majority of the hits had come down between O'Fallon and St. Charles, with only a few strays just across the Missouri River in Earth City. It wasn't a straight line, either; most of the hits in the city of St. Charles itself veered northward and roughly paralleled the river for awhile before reaching it, where the near-solid white began to fragment again. "Okay," said Kilroy, "now look at the sequence."

The screen redrew again, the first frame of a slide show coming up with a single white marker positioned just north of I-70 almost halfway between two exits; he'd zoomed in again so that the streets were now part of the display. "This one's the weight station. It's kinda like an announcement." Another frame drew, showing the O'Fallon area and a time code that matched the first frame; it was followed by a succession of views of the same area, their time codes only a minute apart, anything from two to a dozen hits showing up on each. Individually, they meant little but in sequence it became clear that they were tracking in on something.

The same pattern was apparent when the images began to cover territory farther to the east, then turned north and east at First Capitol. "It gets as far as the river, then reverts to something more normal."

"Looks like it started out with the storm," Silk said. "Railbird, what've you got?"

"It tracked that way at first," she said, pushing back from her own screen. "I've got a radar composite animation here. It's a little jerky, but it's the best I could do with the equipment."

"How many PCs you got wired together, girl?" Silk wanted to know, amazed that Railbird had managed something smooth enough to merit calling it animation. This intern was going to give Billy Travers a run for his money someday, she decided. With or without continuing to scavenge dumpsters in Silicon Valley.

"Just Junior, chief," she answered, referring to the much-modified Amiga prototype she'd discovered junked in the company's trash. It was rather more temperamental than it would have been if she'd left well enough alone but she could do graphics on it that any Visual Effects man in the business would have envied. "I hit up the Weather Channel, not the government; they run these things on cable. I only had to clean it up some and piece it better." She doubleclicked on the 'start' button and the screen came to life, a small brick red spot appearing near the center of the screen only to expand rapidly to both east and west before concentrating its strength at the westward end of that band. The lighter end of the storm, picked out in deep greens, pulled back briefly, then expanded to the east so that it hit the center of the metro area as a normal thundershower might have. After a time, the western end of the band began to pull back inward, picking up speed though not strength; once it had reached the point where all had begun, the whole storm moved eastward, as though the forces driving it had simply lost interest in anything to the west. "I still need to cross-match the cues, but I think this is about where the strikes that side of the river start tailing off," said Railbird as the pictures stopped moving. "Haven't got the processing power or memory to do this in one go; sorry." A few more mouse clicks and the pictures started again, the storm image moving to the east as usual, but the most intense band turning north and east, all the reds edging up to the river shortly after the northern edge of the storm crossed the I-70/I-270 interchange. Then, with no more warning than it had given before starting, the rain west of the river suddenly stopped, and everything to the east tapered off into pale greens or ceased altogether.

"Can you put all of it together on the Cray?" Silk wanted to know, not certain whether she was asking Kilroy or Railbird.

"You want fast, or pretty?" said Railbird. "I could do a fast one here if I network everything."

"Stay out of my flight systems this time. I *don't* want to get stuck on the ground."

These last three days had not been easy ones for anyone who'd remained at the Institute, least of all Professor Hikita, who perhaps possessed a better idea of the depravities Hanoi Xan was capable of than most of us. Where most of the country had learned of the attack upon our hotel within minutes of its occurrence, Buckaroo had known the professor would be in his lab and had deliberately made time to check in with the house personally, in part to prevent his foster father and mentor from overreacting when media reports eventually reached him. Even so, Hikita had been gravely tempted to abandon the experiments he'd stayed behind to monitor, and it had taken considerable persuasion on Buckaroo's part to convince him there was little he could have done to help had he changed his plans and joined us in St. Louis rather than Chicago. There were enough of us in the potential line of fire as it was; even if Xan had ceased to

be an immediate danger, handling Replay would have been interesting enough without such logistical complications as additional personnel.

Still, the professor had found the videotape of the incident to be somewhat more of a shock than anticipated when he'd seen it being run for the umpteenth time more than an hour later. But for knowing the intern quite well, he would have been inclined to consider our relative lack of wounded much more of a miracle. The quality of the footage had clearly been amateur: shaky pictures of the damaged hotel, firefighters arriving, those of us on the first leg of the tour joining a fair number of the hotel staff in holding a skirmish line to keep guests and bystanders back, then a too-fast, out-of-focus pan onto the main entrance door where several fuzzy figures were emerging from the building. New Jersey's nervous glances, Perfect Tommy's one-handed grip on the white Stratocaster, and Buckaroo's almost exaggerated care with his own burden had told Hikita more of the story than words could have hoped to convey at that point; the newsreader's comments had been more redundant than aught else, although by then even the media had come to suspect that there was more going on than the obvious and CNN was beginning to speculate about possible World Crime League involvement.

The story had waned considerably in importance in the national media over the next two days, with only the occasional mention that no one was admitting they knew where we were making it onto the airwaves and into the papers further afield than Missouri. A police spokesman had confessed as much for the cameras and admitted that officials had no intention of looking into that particular issue until or unless we asked for further assistance; there was little that our presence in a public venue could add to the investigation at that point. With nothing more immediately forthcoming about us, the networks had lost interest and turned their attention to other crises. The St. Louis papers in particular had taken to criticizing police handling of the matter, but even those pieces had retreated further from the front page with each successive issue. It was not about to go away within the week, not in a town where the press castigated the cops in the editorial pages the same way they insulted elected officials for a hobby, but neither was it anything that particularly affected the average citizen who hadn't been in or near the hotel at the time. Indeed, the announcement that refunds would be given to those who'd purchased tickets for our canceled shows had sparked more of a furor over the number of people not turning them in, something virtually unheard of in the business at the time regardless of who should have been playing.

People at the Institute, of course, were much more profoundly affected by events in Missouri, and consequently better informed about them. As a matter of field security, we felt constrained to limit the number of times we checked in with folks on the campus and to keep those contacts brief; a signal strong enough to be clearly audible in New Jersey was certainly much easier to detect and triangulate upon than a local transmission would have needed to be. Only the most important of information was passed back and forth via the normal frequencies, all of it scrambled, but the fact remains that we were able to tell them more at first than they were able to tell us. The highest priority message was the one the check-in calls carried simply by existing; we were still breathing.

Even so, the professor was hardly prepared to receive a professional call late on the third afternoon from a St. Louis coroner's deputy who was seeking information about something strange which had turned up in the skull x-rays of a deceased DJ then on his table. A local police officer present to observe the autopsy had suggested that the irregularity seemed similar to one the Institute

had found some years back in one of our own. Hikita had allowed that he was a physicist, not a physician, but that he possessed a certain recall of the incident and would be willing to look at anything the deputy could send him. If it failed to make sense to him, he would then pass it on to the medical department for comment. That had proven to be much more assistance than the deputy had expected, and he'd promised to fax x-rays immediately, with more information to follow as quickly as he obtained it.

Many parts of the human body are inherently curved, and x-rays reflect this fact a good deal more accurately than fax transmissions do. Even so, the grainy pictures that came across the Institute's dedicated fax line would have been enough to stop most BBIs in their tracks had they come across those images unexpectedly. Our decision not to divulge the details of Captain Happen's autopsy had been very deliberate, but it would have been difficult to mistake the bright white irregularity for anything remotely natural. One good look had been all the professor needed to formulate his response to the coroner's office; in his opinion, there was a close to 90 percent chance that it was indeed a transmitter of that type. A return fax would be arriving in St. Louis shortly, this one containing certain details of markings which the deputy could expect to find on it. Such corroboration might well be useful in the event of an eventual trial, although in truth Hikita was firmly convinced that Xan himself was unlikely to face justice in any courtroom.

The professor had no way of knowing whether the police officer in question was in a position to pass anything along to the rest of us, but it seemed pertinent enough to include in the next update. This deceased DJ might not have been one of Xan's puppets after all and the unusual shadings in the x-rays might have had some other source and purpose; circumstances being what they were, it was safer to presume the worst even if we were later proven wrong. The biggest presumption that Hikita was prepared to make about the dead man was that he hadn't known he was a mere pawn until it had already been much too late. The only likely alternative to that was that we'd had yet another of Xan's willing toadies in on the plot. Either way, it was probably something Buckaroo needed to know about.

As useful as she might be if she could be brought under his control, as much mayhem as she could inflict upon the hated Cavaliers, the intern Replay was managing to cause far too much damage to his own people. Xan had begun to wonder whether she was still worth trying to take alive. First the radio mouthpiece, although he was scarcely important enough to have a name at all, then the spy Dingo; now Deng Fat, Ming Ha, and almost an entire local Crime League cell were gone. The DJ had managed to live up to expectations, and would have been no real loss in himself; the cops would have picked him up in any event, although perhaps he could have been salvaged with the right supervision. Dingo was another matter, in retrospect much less surprising than it had first seemed; he would be difficult to replace and was directly attributable to the intern herself. The two bravos were much more personal, and while their deaths were probably related to the incompetence the Crime League boys had already paid for with their own lives, they would not have ended it that way if Replay had been at all predictable. Had she either died or turned upon the Cavaliers, the fool Banzai would not have been worrying about such trifles as contracts and would not have sent anyone afield in less than strike team strength.

As it was, Deng Fat's death had been particularly fruitless, serving only to prevent his capture and wound a single officer. Reports from the paramedic driving the ambulance sent to that scene indicated that the spooked cops had

taken everyone to a local hospital which was presently crawling with personnel from at least two, perhaps three jurisdictions. He'd been unable to get close to anyone but the injured cop and a handful of hospital personnel; without further instructions or excuses, he'd been forced to go back to his own station house to await whatever call came in next. As with Dingo, this hurt Xan more in terms of immediate eyewitness intelligence than in any other way; he had no one permanently attached to the hospital in question. The only way he could get people in unnoticed now was to call upon certain assets among the constabulary themselves.

Chapter Fourteen

Those of you familiar with the adventure Across the Eighth Dimension in both its print and cinematic forms are most likely aware of certain discrepancies in the translation from one medium to the other. While it is certainly true that neither represents the events of those two days with 100% fidelity in regard to conditions at Yoyodyne (neither words nor pictures properly convey the smell of the place), the one glaring difference between the book and the movie which has been brought to our attention repeatedly is the matter of terminology. The film refers to John Whorfin and John Emdall alike as 'Lectroids', distinguishing between their species only by appending the references to their skin colors which are now so commonly heard. At best this is something of an oversimplification; while it is true that John Emdall's ancestors actively designed and bred Whorfin's troops for a considerable while before we encountered any extraterrestrial life, all evidence we have access to proves them to be two separate (though related) species. Of these, it is only Whorfin's kind, referred to as 'Red Lectroids' for most of the movie, who can properly be called 'Lectroids'. John Emdall's people, the so-called 'Black Lectroids' are correctly termed 'Adders'.

This said, I should also note that once the Nova Police had become aware of John Whorfin's 1938 escape to this planet, they were not long in placing agents of their own to prevent anything from happening on Earth which might prove detrimental to Planet 10. From their point of view, it was simply a sensible precaution, not unlike erecting and manning a guard shack at the entrance to a military installation, or a large defense contractor's facilities, save only that the Adders intended their presence to go unnoticed both by humans and the Lectroids. Thanks to intelligence gathered by several sources, John Emdall among them, we now know that these Adder operatives were scattered across a much broader area than their Lectroid targets. Some were specifically tasked to maintain a watch on Yoyodyne and the Trenton Home for the Criminally Insane, others instructed to watch for and report any signs of Lectroid presence beyond Grovers Mill. Indeed, early in the first year she'd spent with us, Jet had inadvertently drawn the attention of one of these latter agents, much to her professional chagrin; unaccustomed to being followed so easily by any but the very best of her own people's undercover officers, she'd been rather concerned she was losing her skills until she'd deliberately courted a confrontation and discovered for herself that Adders possess certain rudimentary psychic abilities of their own.

Unlike John Lancer (who'd spent 30 years as a detective with the New Jersey State Patrol before retiring to go freelance), John Underwood had been with the FBI far too long to get attached to a new partner easily; he'd had a half dozen so far in the eight years he'd worked in St. Louis, two of them deceased now. Three had been transferred to other offices; one he still visited at McDonnell-Douglas on occasion where the man worked a desk job in security from his wheelchair. Allie Westin was -- or should have been -- just partner number seven

for at least several more months, long enough for him to begin to understand her personal limitations in great detail. Instead, he found that he had great difficulty thinking of her as an FBI agent; she simply didn't fit the usual profile in several respects, the first and foremost of them being that she seemed as though she'd had a life.

When she'd called him up at his own apartment to find out if he'd been watching his television, he'd decided he was right. He'd turned the set on and watched the same home video so many others had seen, putting a few more of the pieces together as much from the lack of uniforms as from anything else; the bomb squad may have been called before things went wrong but the lack of police presence shown by the tape was glaring to his eyes. Unlike a number of his colleagues, he hadn't needed the commentary to identify the three men coming out of the building as Buckaroo Banzai, Perfect Tommy, and New Jersey; he probably had a copy of every Hong Kong Cavaliers recording in existence, including a Planet 10 bootleg or three. He also had access to information sources the rest of the local FBI office didn't; by the time the station had started the tape again, he'd been re-transmitting the signal, along with a request for everything the Nova Police might have had on the blood-covered young woman who'd come out of the building in B. Banzai's arms. To his amazement, that request had turned up precious little that Washington wouldn't have been able to find, and most of it had come from public records dating back barely six weeks. Prompted by the information request, an unnamed agent in Brazil had been able to confirm her boarding a plane in Rio, but no one seemed able to verify her existence before that. Only the fact that she'd been attacked at La Guardia pointed to her having any real history at all.

When Allie had dropped this latest surprise in his lap, however, he'd instinctively known it was related to the bombing somehow. Learning that his new partner had instead been intended to have a different name and a life in the Witness Protection Program hadn't been much of a surprise at this point, though he really hadn't been expecting that. She'd also said that the local cop who'd been her guardian for weeks was a Blue Blaze Irregular who might be putting herself at risk in several respects by having anything at all to do with the case. It was time that someone -- meaning Allie -- stepped in to either run interference for this cop, or pull the woman out altogether. Given the speed with which events were suddenly moving, either would have to be a daylight operation. Allie hadn't needed to name names for John Underwood to immediately vote in favor of an extraction; everyone in the local bureau office who'd ever heard of Captain Wilson Travis agreed that the man bordered on pathological when it came to Team Banzai and anyone connected to them. At the least, Travis was suspected of being a crooked cop, with possible links to the World Crime League, but as yet there simply wasn't enough evidence to get a judge to sign a warrant.

Devising the broad outlines of a plan hadn't taken long. Allie and the cop were heading out, or were about to; that made it time for John Underwood to distract Travis. Since the captain either knew or should have known that the officer in question had been involved in a Witness Protection operation, they'd decided to use that as an explanation for their interest in her. Justifying it with their colleagues would require little more than asking the cop a few questions about whether she had any knowledge of a relationship between Travis and Tyrone Anderson. Travis, on the other hand, would have little legal choice but to stand still for it; by the time he could try any of the usual delaying tactics, Allie and her friend should be clear of the building, headed back to the federal building by an indirect route. Unless the World Crime League had managed to infiltrate the bureau, there was only a slim chance that Travis would be able to get his hands on his officer before she was ready to go back.

Crusher Garbanzo was more than a little surprised to get off with nothing more than citations for speeding and for a broken taillight. It figured, though; his luck had been exceptionally consistent for the last 72 hours -- all bad. The one time he fully expected to be arrested, indeed would have preferred to be jailed, the cops only wanted to give him a ticket. The only way it could have been any more embarrassing would have been if he'd actually resorted to attacking the officer in order to get busted; that would have been far too much like that bum on television back in the sixties who'd only wanted a warm place to sleep. Still, in the long run, attacking the cop might have been a good idea if he'd actually thought of it in time; the longer he thought about it, the less certain Crusher was that he still had a life expectancy measurable in any unit larger than days. If the targets had managed to escape, it might be a matter of hours instead. The only way he had to find that out at present was to try to rejoin his team. If they'd actually accomplished their mission, he might live through the year after all.

When he heard something that sounded like two separate explosions in the distance before he even got to Creve Coeur Park, he knew the worst had happened. That left him with scarcely any options: either he faced the fact that he was a walking dead man right now, or he ratted out the World Crime League and hoped the police could hide him long enough for the feds to put him in Witness Protection. Crusher didn't think that was a difficult choice at all. He'd take his chances with the cops; at least then he had a halfway realistic possibility of being around for Christmas.

Under normal circumstances, Buckaroo had no more love for the FBI than any of us; while Yoyogate hadn't significantly affected our relations with President Widmark, there have always been highly-placed government officials who dislike us for one reason or another and the events of that incident had only added to their numbers. Still, we were scheduled to perform in Chicago unless the promoters had changed their minds; having the FBI involved early on might just make that feasible. Jet probably wasn't going to like it one bit, if for no more reason than her unfortunate propensity for encountering federal agents who fell far short of her definition of competence. Her own professionalism was still enough in evidence to convince him that any objections she had would only come up in private, and even then it was possible that she'd admit she didn't see any better options either; she'd never been one to keep her opinions completely to herself, but neither did she share them readily with everyone or let them interfere with business.

"That might not be a bad idea," Buckaroo answered the highway patrolman, startling him slightly. "This may not stay in Missouri."

Rawhide lifted an eyebrow fractionally but said nothing at once; Jet's reaction was only a fraction more extreme. Much against expectations, descending back into the relative chaos of our mobile operations center hadn't reawakened her headache. Indeed, she felt more in her own element than she had since returning to consciousness; if nearly all the faces were unfamiliar, the circumstances were not. Strictly speaking, it would not have constituted a tactical situation for anyone but her, yet people were clearly functioning in high alert mode, ready for trouble to come from anywhere. She might not be that thrilled with the idea but had to admit that getting a few trained sets of eyes into the mix was

hardly the worst they could do, provided there was a practical way of filtering out any possible troublemakers first. At the least, the FBI people would come into things with all their usual skills intact, something she couldn't claim for herself at the moment. Just now, her abilities in that regard were limited to eye and ear, experience and intellect. She was operating at a distinct disadvantage on several accounts and knew it; none of us would have blamed her in the slightest if she'd stayed upstairs, hiding like a frightened child. The lady was not so lenient with herself; so long as there was something useful she was able to do, there would be no standing down before the crisis ended.

Like most of us, she had no real fondness for the Bureau but in her case it came from experience, not innate distrust, and she held no real grudges against them in general; her distaste for their agents was purely a professional issue and subject to case-by-case review. Rawhide was for the most part like-minded when it came to government personnel, holding the INS in higher general esteem but wary of the FBI in particular because of the way they'd treated Red Di. Yes, there were competent people in the Bureau that we could afford to trust, not limited to agents on the verge of a parting of the ways with their employer, but there were also people who would have enjoyed nothing more than putting us out of business altogether. With local cops, telling the difference would have been relatively simple, even for us; with trained field operatives it became more difficult, perhaps impossible without a telepath to screen them. "Think we ought to run them past Wayback?" Rawhide asked.

"Among others," said Buckaroo. "Check names with Red Di." He turned back to the highway patrolman. "Can you put in a word with the Governor?"

"Ah, sure. I'll see what I can do now; it may take awhile."

One look at the FBI agent in his office had been enough to tell Wilson Travis that he had a problem. For one thing, it was the first time he'd seen a bureau man who wasn't constantly trying to get a look at everything on the desk, the bookshelves, and the walls. For another, they seldom came alone; there were usually at least two of them, which had immediately worried him that he actually had two agents unaccounted for in the building. John Underwood had disabused him of that notion quickly enough, but that was the only overt good news which had come from the conversation.

The worst of it hadn't been said. He'd already known what the FBI thought of him, but beyond making certain there'd been no evidence for them to find, he hadn't worried about it much until now. Allegations were well and good, but until they could prove something, they could make allegations until they were all blue in the face and nothing would happen. One of his favorite things about being a police captain was how simple it made it to make certain evidence either went uncollected, vanished, was inadvertently contaminated, or otherwise became inadmissible.

As for handing over one of his officers, Travis was secretly overjoyed to have Murphy off the hotel investigation for awhile. Anything that inconvenienced Team Banzai suited him just fine, so long as no one started making accusations that he was deliberately heel-dragging; it would be a lot more difficult to control what happened with the evidence if the Chief suddenly reassigned the incident to the major case squad, after all. But with the lab technician in charge of things out of the picture through no fault of his own, the possibilities for creative alterations suddenly opened up tremendously. She scarcely ever came out of her

lab, so the chance she had of connecting him to anything that would interest the FBI was anorexic. Still, there had to be something to this Witness Protection issue and he wondered if maybe that information would be useful to him. It was definitely time to wander down to Records...

Special Agent Westin didn't have an standard office in the FBI suite of the Federal Building; instead she had a corner of the lab and a tiny room scarcely larger than a cubicle for her working files. This being the case, she took Murphy up to the conference room, pausing only long enough to announce her return. "I try to let George know what I'm up to when they might want me," Allie said; "You never know if -- Wilson, wasn't it? -- might want another consult."

"I know where I'd like to send the fragments," Murphy admitted, "but I don't think the D.A. would approve." From her tone, it was immediately apparent that she had no intention of making that particular evidence vanish altogether; rather, she had doubts that her own department was as well equipped to analyze them properly as Team Banzai might be.

"You'd be surprised how much trouble 'conflict of interest' issues cause some of the guys around here. Not a problem I have to deal with much; people want bombers caught too bad. I wonder if they don't put the wrong guys away for that occasionally.

"Unfortunately, I can't just go in there and demand custody of the evidence. Not without a lot more on Travis than I've got. Getting my hands on even some of it would probably take too long to be useful."

"Well, you probably know his service record better than I do. I've only known him for about a year; word around the station is that he's been shuffled around a bit, just enough that we wonder -- we haven't got a pool on it or anything -- if he's gonna be permanent or gone in six months. His line's been that he was here to clean up our act; I don't really know what that means to the guys on the street, but it hasn't changed much around the station except the language and the paperwork lag."

"Not enough for you to wonder if he maybe had too much cooperation?"

"No. I try to stay in the lab when I can; if I wasn't a Blue Blaze as well as a cop, I'd probably have resorted to cosmetic surgery by now, or gotten a man-hating pit bull I'd take everywhere. It gets old pretty quick, y'know?"

"I figured that out six months ago. I'm surprised you don't have the pit bull anyway."

"No space. And so far, it hasn't quite met the legal definition of harassment. Besides, how would it look on my internship application?"

Allie actually laughed. "Yeah, I can see the kind of looks that'd get, all right. A cop who needs protection..."

"Well, actually, do me a favor and don't tell your boss this, but I think I've learned more about self-defense from the Institute seminars I've actually gotten to than I did at the academy. Those guys don't mess around."

"Can't afford to, from what I hear."

Chapter Fifteen

Crime in general may not be what people mean when they refer to the world's oldest profession, but as a category it ranks pretty high on the seniority list. From time immemorial, small-time operators have been largely anonymous among their fellows if not always to the local authorities. Likewise, law enforcement has been plagued with corruption to some degree for nearly as long as the distinction between cop and crook has existed.

Crusher Garbanzo would not have been confused about his ticket if he'd known Officer Michael Banger was among the corrupt. Banger was aware that Crusher was with the World Crime League; his instructions in that regard were quite clear: do as little to interfere as possible without putting himself or his career in jeopardy. Perhaps ticketing Crusher hadn't been absolutely necessary, but meeting his unofficial monthly quota could justify it.

When he heard explosions, he would have liked to investigate, but dispatch already had more traffic than they could handle easily. There was at least one officer down and an ambulance already on the scene; fire trucks were en route as well. Beyond that, the radio calls Banger was able to decipher became confused to such a degree that he couldn't tell whether Garbanzo had been involved. Reporting himself as leaving his beat just then would have been difficult at best and suspicious at worst.

The whisper in his head half an hour closer to shift change was no great surprise. Master Xan issued his instructions personally as often as not, although Banger could not have said whether this was the case with other moles or whether the Master merely derived a perverse pleasure from giving him orders because he was a cop. It was a peculiar week when he didn't receive some message from the transmitter in his skull. Sometimes compliance made his life more interesting than he preferred; this promised to be one of those situations. At least he didn't have to rack his brain for an excuse to check into things at De Paul, not with one of his fellow officers reportedly in the ER.

To the best of our collective knowledge, Jet's own detractors have called her many things, (some of them unprintable) but slow is not among them. For the main, even we have been rather uncertain how much of her quickness on the uptake is a matter of her psionics and how much of it experience. Certainly it was the latter which inclined her to view the highway patrolman as a potential low-grade threat, not particularly to be worried about unless he learned of Dingo but nonetheless an unknown quantity. In her present state, she was inclined to be especially cautious of anything she didn't have a firm handle on. Anything else would have been asking for trouble.

The relief she felt when that officer headed off to use the state's equipment to speak to the governor's office didn't show in her face. In theory she had more latitude for discussion than she'd had earlier; in practice, she was still as constrained by her uncertainties as she'd been since waking. Buckaroo and Rawhide were family, people with whom she could safely discuss anything without fear of repercussions. Neither of them had as yet given her reason to believe that anyone else still on the bus was -- or wasn't -- kin as well. Under those circumstances, she was inclined to keep things to herself as much as practical.

Buckaroo understood how she felt; for a few moments at least, they had a bit of relative privacy. It wouldn't last long; the officer was likely to rejoin them before the bus got underway again, and anything really sensitive needed to be dealt with well before he might overhear it, or not discussed until later. Their next chance to talk would probably be some hours in coming. "With luck, Wayback will have his hands full with the FBI and the cops," Buckaroo told Jet. "After how the bureau treated a couple of ours, he'll be more worried about them than you."

"Good." There may have been a bit more emphasis in her tone than she might have used otherwise; with her background, it was just as likely she would have sounded that way regardless. "I'd be a lot happier if the world would go away for awhile, but I'll take what I can get."

The look that got from him was one she didn't need to remember him at all to interpret; this was an issue where he couldn't make any promises and didn't intend to insult her intelligence by trying to. "You think you're up to flashbulbs, or should we find you some shades?" he asked instead. This was not something he would have had the opportunity to ask if she'd been human and as afflicted with local technology as the general public; any human who'd survived a direct lightning strike would probably still have been unconscious and in a far worse state than she presently was.

Even so, the question would have surprised her a great deal more if she hadn't already decided he was family; indeed, if not for the legend writ large on the side of the bus which told her she was dealing with a public figure, she might not have taken his phrasing as anything more than a private joke. He clearly knew she was still suffering from a headache that might be severe enough to make her light-sensitive, something which was as much the result of hearing the thunder at point blank range as it was of the lightning itself. It was possible he was still looking for signs of neurological trauma, but his tone seemed a bit too casual for that. "I think I can manage not to look right at any," she answered, wondering how serious he really was about *paparazzi* under the circumstances. "Wasn't lookin' when I got hit, or I'd have one more problem now."

Undoubtedly anyone who'd been at the aborted briefing would have liked to interpret the remark as meaning she was aware she was trying to maintain a cover; those who knew her to any real degree were by now too experienced to expect it, much as they might devoutly wish otherwise. Buckaroo himself interpreted it to be reference to the state of her memory. "Dingo," he prompted, getting to sensitive issues now that she was as up to speed as she was likely to get anytime soon.

"I hate dealing with the other guy's surveillance gear," she said. "And if I read Pecos right, it's probably worse than that. Sedation should handle both issues for awhile but there's no guarantees, and the *last* thing I want to have to deal with is in-flight stupidity from the boy."

"Worst case?" Rawhide interrupted.

"Decompression, possibly catastrophic loss of structural integrity." It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize she was thinking in terms of what might happen to the 727 if the scar at the base of Dingo's skull meant explosives rather than electronics.

"We can have the bomb squad on call," Buckaroo said.

Even with her memory in shreds, Jet picked up on the subtleties of his tone at once. "But you'd rather keep it in the Family. Makes at least two of us." It was clear she was concerned about the police, regardless of the fact that this was a different jurisdiction; being charged with something as minor as unlawful discharge of a weapon wasn't the kind of thing she generally worried about even in retrospect, regardless of where she was. This could only mean that something about the immediate consequences of an arrest bothered her more than usual.

Rawhide might have volunteered agreement on keeping extra personnel out of it had Big Norse not interrupted the conversation at that point. "Buckaroo, you'd better take this one. Professor Hikita. Pretty disturbing stuff."

Concerned though he was about what he had to say, Hikita looked profoundly relieved to see any of us, Buckaroo in particular. This alone was enough to indicate that he knew we'd been out of touch. The information he had to impart left little to the imagination beyond the issue of loyalties; without a living witness to testify in that regard, none of us could do more than guess how willing a part of Xan's schemes the DJ had been.

Still, it was going to be interesting to learn what more the coroner's office might have to say about the autopsy. Finding the control implants intact was a very mixed blessing; clearly something had gone wrong with this one, the first one we'd discovered whole since the events surrounding Peggy's death. On the other hand, the fact that it was there to be found in any condition at all was decidedly bad news, particularly with Dingo in the equation. With the time constraints we were under, about all the coroner's deputy could do for us immediately would be to fax his pictures directly to World Watch One, so Buckaroo would have them for comparison.

Jet approved of that idea at once if the expression on her face was any indicator. The sooner the possibility of a bomb could be discounted or proven, the sooner things would be dealt with properly. She knew of at least three separate ways to detonate explosives using x rays as part of the triggering mechanism; photos of the DJ's implant still in place should allow for visual identification and should make it simpler to decide how to successfully disable or perhaps even remove a transmitter. Buckaroo ought to be able to handle that himself, or would have plenty of help at hand if he needed it without her getting involved.

Full precautions were nonetheless called for until any foreign object could be exposed sufficiently for inspection but, if explosives were involved, it wasn't the sort of thing many bomb squads had personnel trained to deal with. She would have wagered several thousand dollars that the ex-military surgeons she could personally name who'd disarmed patients would exceed the number of demolition men with like experience, even if one polled all the bomb squads in the country; aware as she was of the gaping holes in her recollection, she was still able to come up with a dozen people last known to reside in Missouri alone.

It was not something she claimed to be anywhere close to expert about either, but unless Buckaroo or Rawhide told her otherwise, she was prepared to believe that she had more experience dealing with booby-trapped personnel than anyone else at hand; necessity is at times a great teacher. The trick, she thought, would be getting the needful workspace evacuated without causing a panic in the process; this time, she was going to need a much larger area cleared to prevent bystanders from being injured if she messed up.

"Agent Westin, a word with you please." Special Agent in Charge George Raines scarcely ducked his head into the conference room long enough to make the request, if one could call it that.

"Go ahead," Murphy told her friend. "Wouldn't want to keep the boss waiting. I'm not likely to get into trouble."

Allie nodded and went out into the hall. "You haven't heard from Travis, have you?" she asked her superior.

"Your 'protected witness' there, she's a Blue Blaze Irregular, right?"

"She ID'd herself to the St. Charles PD that way when she called them earlier." She did not say that it wasn't the first she knew of Murphy's involvement with Team Banzai; even if that hadn't been a part of her former life, she didn't particularly see that Raines needed to know it.

"I just heard from the Governor," said Raines. "He'd like us to look into things. Your 'witness' might be just the person we need for liason with Team Banzai; I have contacts at Quantico who tell me they may not appreciate having us around."

"How do you want to handle it? I wouldn't ask Travis to loan her to us for the duration."

"Thought I'd go over his head, ask the Chief. You have enough on him to get him out of the picture?"

"Not that'll hold up in court. Enough for IAD to make his life miserable for a couple weeks with, though. I can have it on your desk in ten minutes as is, or maybe an hour if I can get anything more from Murphy."

"Murphy?"

"Get used to hearing it, boss; right now, she won't let me put her legal name on record until we give her some guarantees Travis won't come down on her like stink on a skunk. Murphy's her Blue Blaze identity."

"I guess it's better than 'Informant number...' -- what are we up to this year, anyway?" Raines almost certainly knew, if he wanted to bother retrieving it from memory; he was good with that sort of thing. "I'll settle for what you've got now, but keep me updated as you find out more. You and Underwood take Murphy; go out to De Paul. Someone in the ER ought to know where you can find Dr. Banzai; see what he'll tell you -- or Murphy."

Those of you familiar with televised police dramas undoubtedly know more about their depiction of standard procedure that this poor scribe can expand upon. It is not at all uncommon for such shows to feature police officers who are able to leave multiple witnesses to an incident in a single room safely merely by giving them instructions not to discuss things among themselves before they can speak to an officer individually. While this might be the desired standard in theory, it's seldom so simple or clear-cut in the real world, where the police must deal

with staffing and/or other logistics problems, and where people told not to talk are in fact the most likely to do just that.

While I have no doubt that at least some of our detractors will continue their claims that we received special treatment until at least the end of this millennium, the fact remains that practical concerns had more bearing on how the St. Louis County and Maryland Heights police dealt with Wayback and myself. Apart from any security issues that might have had a bearing on matters, there was little real reason to insist we be interviewed individually. Had we been of a mind to concoct some coordinated story to tell, we'd clearly had plenty of time to do so; since we weren't suspects at this point, they couldn't threaten either of us with immediate incarceration or the likelihood of serious jail time in order to convince us that dropping such a fiction would be in our best interests. Juggling their available manpower in order to handle taking separate statements was clearly too much effort for too little chance of it making any difference at all.

Even so, there are the occasional matters which work the same in real life as on television. When Wayback began to describe how he'd kept our rental car on the road, the officers were every bit as disbelieving as their fictitious counterparts would have been. One of them even rejected his offer to take a sobriety test, insisting that it made no difference; drunk or sober, Wayback was out of his mind if he believed what he was saying. Another was only a trifle more open-minded, wondering instead if our parapsychologist was human or one of those 'creatures from outer space' he was firmly convinced the Institute attracts. Fortunately for Wayback's patience, and perhaps my own sanity, they were all distracted from the issue by new arrivals in the ER.

Chapter Sixteen

Governor Kline, like any serious politician a great follower of public opinion polls, had been more than willing to speak to the FBI on our behalf and to inform the Highway Patrol and the various local jurisdictions that he had done so. The officers escorting the bus were to remain at that duty until the FBI told them otherwise, but merely as a matter of security. The local police at De Paul were likewise to wait for their state counterparts to arrive, although they were effectively off the case immediately, and their only further interest was to watch over Wayback and myself until the area could be better secured.

Naturally, this news was of considerable immediate interest to the two of us, bearing as it did on the questioning we had been undergoing. Thanks to the governor, we had been spared any additional comments in regard to Wayback's sanity and/or state of inebriation; by then I confess that I, at least, was grateful for even so small a reprieve from the pressures of the day. Alas that it did not mean the officers fell silent, for shortly after receiving these new instructions they were joined by another of their number. This individual drew Wayback's cautious attention immediately, which at first I attributed to his apparent concern for the downed officer still in surgery; we learned much later that he was Michael Banger, whom Hanoi Xan had sent to the hospital both to keep us under close surveillance and to attempt to devise some means of disrupting our immanent reunion with the rest of Team Banzai.

Eventually, the Chief of Emergency Medicine, whom I shall refer to here as Dr. S****, made his way to where we were gathered. It was immediately clear that he recognized this poor scribe, and I was on the verge of expecting him to be taken

somewhat aback by my presence when he recovered from his initial startlement. "And I told Mary no cameras," he said to himself quite levelly before he made himself known; after that small admission that we had fans in the department, which I believe the officers to have missed altogether, he was completely professional. "Officer Philbin made it through surgery successfully," he informed us. "We believe we removed most of the, ahem, shrapnel, although it may be several days before we're certain. He's being moved to ICU now. I presume someone has contacted the next of kin?"

"We're trying," said one of the Maryland Heights officers. "Rest of the family's out of town at some kind of convention. The neighbors think it may take awhile to track them down."

"I see." It was clear he wasn't pleased. I had to sympathize; since becoming a resident, I have spent more hours than I care to count filling out hospital paperwork in the aftermath of incidents when identifying the wounded took a back seat to treating them. After Yoyodyne, measures were put in place to allow any resident the legal power to make medical decisions for interns, apprentices, and even BBIs (who'd filed the necessary documents) should circumstance require it; thankfully, I have yet to find myself in such a situation, but having such a responsibility even in theory is enough to foster great empathy for any physician faced with a choice between legalities and ethics.

Dr. S**** didn't let his frustrations with the system get the better of him. "And your superiors?"

One of the officers had kept his radio on throughout, although he'd turned the volume down considerably while they'd been questioning us; it was through this means that we had learned of the FBI's sudden involvement in the case. We were a bit unprepared for the newest arrival to speak up instead. "He's a pretty popular guy," Banger said; "The whole precinct is pulling for him. Lieutenant's probably already upstairs." He looked at Wayback from the corner of his eye as he spoke, as though the Canadian intern perhaps fit some manner of profile. At the time, I tried to dismiss it as a knee-jerk reaction to Wayback's own caution, having learned that law enforcement officials of almost every level tend to react poorly to even the slightest indication they are feared or mistrusted. "I figured I'd better find out how bad it is before I tried finding out what science fiction thing Jo and the kids are off at. Got a cousin into that stuff; she may know where to find 'em."

Dr. S**** wasn't the only one pleased to hear it, merely the first to admit it in his body language. The other officers had been in law enforcement too long to show so much relief as that in the presence of 'civilians', and contented themselves with mock harassment of their peer; some of it was the predictable reaction of single men upon the discovery that another of their number had perhaps been holding out on them. I suppose they refrained from any serious rudeness directed at said cousin's actual hobbies largely in deference to the presence of witnesses of a scientific bent rather than any real respect for the unknown woman, for it was clear that they held SF fans in approximately the same high esteem as those acquitted of public nuisance charges.

Regular readers of these adventures may recall considerably more about our previous encounters with the FBI than bears repeating here. Suffice it to say that most of these dealings had not been especially pleasant for anyone associated, however slightly, with Team Banzai. It was with no small surprise that I realized I actually anticipated the arrival of Bureau personnel, if only due to my own growing unease under the eyes of the local constabulary. Sitting

here now, I can only suppose that Wayback was communicating his own wariness in some indefinable way; at that juncture, he knew only that he had taken a vehement dislike to Banger, for no reason he was then able to ascertain.

The Highway Patrol officer who'd spoken to Governor Kline returned to World Watch One after a rather longer delay than any of us would have hoped for, with the news that the Patrol would provide an escort at least as far as De Paul; further involvement would depend on what the FBI agents assigned to the case required. Nor was the officer to remain aboard the bus; his presence there was deemed unnecessary now that our own communications had been restored, although if that changed, T-Bear was to signal the Patrol with the headlights.

Jet in particular was pleased to hear this last bit of news, if only out of paranoia which none of us would have considered completely misplaced at the time. The officer was after all, an outsider who could not possibly be threatened with loss of employment if he repeated something she'd rather he hadn't heard; she doubted the same could be said for anyone else on the bus. She didn't want to let anything slip in front of most of them either, but it was quite clear to her that they, at least, were part of the same organization as the two brothers she was certain of. There was a more than reasonable chance that these were the people she could borrow Buckaroo's authority over, so long as she didn't get too outrageous putting words in his mouth.

Buckaroo kept his thoughts much to himself as he thanked the patrolman and sent the man on his way. "Rawhide," he said once the doors had closed behind the officer, "we'll be upstairs."

Rawhide acknowledged with a nod and turned to check progress on the mixed group of officers and interns collecting both evidence and photographs outside. Things were progressing well, which he had mixed feelings about. So long as Wayback and I were sitting at De Paul without them, he considered us sitting ducks for further mayhem; at the same time, the longer Jet and Wayback could be kept apart, the better chances were that he'd fail to discover who she really was. The sooner the bridge team finished up, the sooner we'd be reunited, and the sooner Jet would be center stage. It should not have been difficult for him to decide whether ensuring our safety or maintaining her cover was the higher priority, but for the fact that he had more idea than most what could happen if Wayback chanced to be as much of a spy as Dingo had proven. His only certain consolation at present was that if Jet should fall under Xan's control, the Pivot of Mystery would discover he himself had largely defanged her. This did not mean that she wouldn't be hard to stop, or that it wouldn't tear at Buckaroo's soul, but it did make her a considerably easier target for anyone as familiar with her anatomy and emotions as we were.

"We don't have a lot of time," Buckaroo told Jet, waving her up the stairs first.

"Tell me," she interrupted wryly, starting back up. "Dingo is not going to hold as long as I'd like; I don't care what you've hit him with." It was hardly surprising that she was more concerned about her former colleague than how Wayback might react when they crossed paths; by her own laws, she remained responsible for him in spite of the fact that she'd seconded him to us temporarily. Those laws had not demanded she try to keep him alive when he'd so clearly preferred to die rather than remain as a threat but her own sense of honor did. So long as he remained no more than a potential threat, she had no

intention of doing him any unnecessary damage.

Buckaroo didn't waste words explaining that the ex-cop wasn't his first priority. At some level, she was still too much the Jet he'd come to know; if Dingo became overly hazardous to anyone but her, she'd do whatever was necessary without a second thought. She'd been a warrior far too long to do otherwise. Neglecting her own problems was much more likely. "Except Lindbergh and T-bear," he began, "anyone you've talked to so far is Family. Lindbergh, Pecos, Norse, Tommy and New Jersey here know about as much as I do; Rawhide has a good idea of most of it. We all manage to keep secrets from Wayback."

"I'd hope so," said Jet, just sharply enough to indicate she didn't really appreciate being left in the dark this long, even if she understood it. "What I wanna know about the man is why he thinks he hates my guts."

The relief that flitted across Buckaroo's face was entirely due to his sudden certainty that she had indeed caught his earlier clue. "Don't take this the wrong way," he said, knowing she might otherwise do so. "As near as I can tell, he's jealous of your usual persona, who goes by Jet."

"So, Wayback is jealous. Why? Because I left for some reason?"

"I'll explain later," said Buckaroo. "Right now, he thinks you're just an intern called 'Replay'. I told you about Xan and the talava...."

"And he doesn't like Jet, so we wouldn't have accomplished anything at all if I hadn't been flying a cover ID past his nose," she interrupted, understanding. "No further than I was getting at home, I was probably about ready to risk being blown if we'd learned anything first."

"Just how sloppy a cover was I running? He's a telepath, right?"

"Thin. We handed you a name and a little background; you ran with it. A lot of it was based on your history with Xan. You said you'd warped an existing identity you'd used with Langley before, but never mentioned any names. We don't have the time or talent to rebuild what you'd call an *im sehi*-grade cover. If we're lucky, we can maybe delay things."

"Langley limits it better than you know," she disagreed; "I only have a couple I've shown off for the Company. One in three shot of pegging it on the first guess."

"If you don't, we'll never hear the end of it," New Jersey warned her. "Unless we can convince him the lightning strike on top of being headblind affected your personality."

"Being headblind by itself can do that," she said, "though usually by way of serious depression. Not something I'm prone to, so far as we can tell."

"I don't remember any of my Company-approved ID's being EOD, though. That a deliberate part of the warpage, or something that's come up?"

"EOD?" It was apparently the first time New Jersey had heard the term.

"Military way of saying bomb squad," she explained. "Nothing I've deliberately trained for, Lords know, but I keep learning it anyway. Don't usually have a choice."

"Rawhide told Wayback you'd said you weren't at liberty to discuss it, but we thought you'd been Mossad at one time, before they found out you were a talent."

It wasn't the first time she'd been presumed an Israeli agent based on her warrior nature and her coloration. "Way those guys play, if they thought for a second they had themselves a real talent, they'd either retire it themselves, or never in a million years give it up willingly. He bought it?"

"From the looks Wayback was giving you while you were out," said New Jersey, "hook, line, and sinker. He's not too up on politics, our boy."

"Tell me what I should watch out for, then. Any more of those blind spots, and anything he's apt to look at way too close for comfort."

The arrival of World Watch One at De Paul did not cause a great deal of consternation. Big Norse had notified them of our plans once she'd handed off Professor Hikita's incoming call to Buckaroo, giving them more warning than an ER staff often has about incoming casualties. She had been able to provide them with some idea of what to expect as well, although she omitted names in the process and had already covered what she knew of Dingo's status by the time the Highway Patrol officer returned from speaking to the Governor. That this was by no means a matter of chance says much for our Danish resident's tracking abilities.

By the time the bus pulled up to the building near, but not blocking, the ER entrance, all the necessary preparations for dealing with any VIP short of a head of state had been completed. Warned that Buckaroo Banzai himself would be visiting, some senior physicians might have given in to the temptation to trot out their staff as if for a household inspection; Dr. S**** had absolutely no aspirations in that direction, and had felt it necessary to read one or two recent arrivals the riot act insofar as they were likely, he felt, to go over the top otherwise. The chief nurse needed no such reminders; Wayback and I recognized "Mary" as the graying, mid-50ish woman who'd ordered us out of our soaked clothes and into dry scrubs with such firm disregard for anything other than our drowned rat appearance that neither of us could help but be reminded of a teaching nun dealing with wayward students.

This did not mean that Dr. S**** relegated the job of meeting Buckaroo at the door to anyone else. Not only would that have been inappropriate in his eyes, he'd been planning on attending the canceled seminar at SLU and was accordingly anxious over this unexpected opportunity to meet the keynote speakers after all. Certainly he was not above admitting considerable admiration for the Institute's contributions to medicine, which were by no means confined to neurological research alone. He was sorry that he'd had to meet people under the present circumstances, of course, but confessed himself a great fan of our video series "First Responder 101 for the Medical Professional" and asked Buckaroo to thank Dr. Lightfoot in particular, as her first tape in the series had saved him from a malpractice suit only a few months back.

Buckaroo, educated just enough in her cultural background to realize rather precisely how much of an insult the term 'lightfoot' was, had made the conscious decision not to tell Jet the name she customarily used among us. That particular term was the literal English translation, though the original had no direct equivalent and could be simultaneously translated as meaning prostitute, thief,

con artist, and vagrant -- all with their worst possible interpretations. Among her own, being convicted of such a charge would have left her in about as sweet a position in jail as that enjoyed by a flasher or child molester in our own prisons. There was little doubt in his mind that just now she would have completely misunderstood Perfect Tommy's intent to praise her unobtrusiveness, though in the time and place he'd first uttered it, she'd seen no little humor in the contrast between languages. New Jersey's reaction to it was entirely too obvious for B. Banzai's comfort, though Dr. S**** failed to notice it.

In her present state of mind, Jet could no more have missed it than she could have pulled a 727 from the sky by muscles alone. Had she not been headblind, Buckaroo might have had reason to fear much more than her simply blowing her own cover. He could not know that the only reason her field discipline held was that she realized Dr. S**** couldn't have known there were major differences in the cultural connotations, and the only outward reaction she gave was to interrupt the conversation to inquire whether the hospital had received any faxes from the St. Louis City Coroner's office.

It was at this juncture that all involved realized that Big Norse, unaware of Dingo's possible complications, had not mentioned the likelihood that he was wired for more than video. Dr. S****, unaccustomed to dealing with such blackguards as Hanoi Xan, was aghast at the idea that such a thing might be happening, and might have folded but for the fact that he had been the Chief of Emergency Medicine long enough to realize he had to remain calm for the benefit of the rest of his staff, if not the patients. "Replay," introduced as the closest thing to a bomb expert as we had until the bomb squad could arrive, allowed as how she suspected evacuating the wing would probably be sufficient; the fact that Dingo's personality hadn't changed significantly limited the size of the device, if one was present, to the point that there was little chance of structural damage beyond the first two floors. She was, however, unwilling to commit to whether the threat was legitimate without a look at the electronics in his head and an opportunity to compare them to photos of the unit the coroner had found.